

Emotional Realism, Affective Labor, and Politics in the Arab Fandom of *Game of Thrones*

KATTY ALHAYEK¹

University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA

This article examines the *Game of Thrones* (GoT) fan phenomena in the Arab world. Although I contextualize GoT as a commodity within HBO's global ambitions to attract a global audience, I study GoT Arab fans as an organized interpretive online community. I examine the Arabic fan Facebook page "Game of Thrones–Official Arabic Page" (GoT-OAP), which has over 240,000 followers, as a case study of cultural production and consumption by fans. Based on interviews with members of the administration staff of the GoT-OAP Facebook page, as well as textual analysis of the page's posts, I ask: How is fan culture around GoT produced in the Arab world? How are the boundaries between being fans, media producers, and consumers negotiated? Are there connections between the themes of GoT and the current unrest across the Arab region? If so, how are they articulated? Through emotional realism and hybridity, I show that Arab fans find ways to negotiate their fandom of GoT with their local context and lived experiences.

Keywords: fandom, Arab world, Game of Thrones, quality television, hybridity, emotional realism, affective labor, affective economics

In this article, I focus on the Arabic fan Facebook page "Game of Thrones–Official Arabic Page" (GoT-OAP), which has over 240,000 Arab followers, as a case study of cultural production and consumption by fans. While the page's administrators come primarily from three countries—Tunisia, Egypt, and Palestine—most of the page's followers are from Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Statistics provided, upon my request, by the page's administration staff show that 80% of the page followers are male and 20% are female, 48% of the fans are between 18 and 24 years old, and 28% are between 25 and 34 years old. Throughout this article, I use the term *Arab* not to refer to a specific race necessarily, but rather to refer to an identity with the Arabic language and the geography and history of the so-called Arab World. GoT-OAP's fans belong to a variety of nationalities, ethnicities, and religions within the Arab world.

Katty Alhayek: katty.alhayek@gmail.com

Date submitted: 2017-01-22

¹ Sincere thanks to Lisa Henderson for her help in the elaboration of this article and to the IJoC anonymous reviewers whose revisions were invaluable. Many thanks to the administrators of "Game of Thrones–Official Arabic Page" for their vital collectively authored letter. I am also very grateful to Ben Nolan and Basileus Zeno for their insightful feedback and comments.

Copyright © 2017 (Katty Alhayek). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

My primary interest in this article is in investigating fandom of quality television (QT) in the Arab world. *Game of Thrones* (GoT) is one of the most successful representatives of this type of American television that has been described as the "new Golden Age of television drama" (Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 160). GoT has achieved widespread popularity globally, averaging more than 25.1 million viewers per episode in 2016 (Shepherd, 2016). This viewership number does not include illegal downloads and represents only terrestrial viewers, digital recordings, HBO GO, HBO NOW, and HBO On Demand. It is difficult to estimate the actual size of the international audience of GoT, especially as the show holds the dubious honor of being the most illegally downloaded show of 2015 (Hibbard, 2015). The show is an HBO original American fantasy drama based on the adaptation of George R. R. Martin's series of fantasy novels *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASOIAF). It depicts struggles for political, social, and personal power in a fictional, quasimedieval setting with magical elements. GoT has drawn both acclaim and criticism for its graphic depictions of sexual and political violence. The producers, the author of the book series that inspired GoT, as well as many fans of the show have defended the inclusion of such violence as "realistic" (Itzkoff, 2014). The show even draws comparisons, in popular media outlets, with real-world life events such as the Syrian conflict. These comparisons demand a deeper exploration of how this show is perceived by Arab audiences.

GoT fandom has become a significant international cultural phenomenon. Fans of the show include popular culture celebrities including Madonna as well as politicians such as Julia Gillard, David Cameron, and Barack Obama, who was depicted in a manipulated image published by the White House official Twitter account sitting on the Iron Throne in the Oval Office with the king's crown on his lap (Figure 1). Writing for *The Telegraph*, Boulton (2015) explains GoT fandom among politicians, "[GoT] displays power-politics in the raw, where no motive is ever entirely pure, and even good deeds have a downside" (para. 11). Boulton's comment can be read as an explanation not only of GoT's popularity among politicians but also of who is in the show's perceived/intended audience. Polan (2007) illuminates the latter point in his description of HBO quality series' intended audience:

Typical HBO episodic series play to an intellectually savvy and culturally informed spectator who has been trained (or is being trained) to take cultural works to be enigmas or puzzles in which one goes beyond the text at hand to something else. (p. 280)

In GoT, this "something else" can be understood as intellectual questions of struggle over political power. Polan cautions us against studying QT as valuable in and of itself. Rather Polan invites us to study QT within the context of the cultural industry, to understand it "as a commodity fabricated to flow from producers to consumers" (p. 268).



Figure 1. Screenshot of the White House official Twitter account showing Obama on the Iron Throne in an image posted May 3, 2014.

To study GoT and Arab fandom, in this article I contextualize GoT as a commodity that meets HBO's ambitions to attract a global audience. HBO has licensed GoT to be broadcast by multiple television networks around the world. For example, on February 1, 2016, Orbit Showtime Network (OSN) launched a new channel (OSN First HD—Home of HBO) which allows regional Arab fans of HBO shows such as GoT to see them the moment they debut. Although I am contextualizing GoT as a commodity within HBO's global operation, in this study, I do not want to study GoT and Arab fandom as a mere relationship between the show's producers and the fans as consumers. Following Radway (1984) and Jenkins (1992), my interest here is in studying Arab fans of GoT as an interpretive community, to focus on fans as cultural producers themselves, and not strictly as consumers. Indeed, what distinguishes fandom from the larger group of media audiences is the sense of community and the social interaction among its members. According to Busse and Gray (2011), fandom consists of members/fans who share a specific identity that constructs their membership beyond the mere fact of their shared media consumption. However, as Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) highlight, in the digital age "we are seeing the erosion of traditional boundaries—between commercial and grassroots, fan and producer" (pp. 28–29). Thus, in examining the Arab fan phenomenon surrounding GoT, I am interested in exploring what it means to be an Arab fan and a consumer of American QT. Through interviews with members of the administrative staff of this Facebook page as well as textual analysis of the page's posts and the loyal followers' comments, I ask: How is fan culture around GoT produced in the Arab world? How are the boundaries between being fans, media producers, and consumers negotiated? Are there connections between the themes of GoT and the current unrest across the Arab region? If so, how are they articulated?

Online Correspondence

As an Arab fan of HBO QT and particularly GoT, I am interested in understanding the ambivalent relationship between being a consumer and being a fan of this type of television. While HBO aims to draw in as many consumers as possible, HBO's brand uses masculinity and "offers to 're-mark' subscribers as 'masculine,' thus repositioning its audience as powerful bearers of cultural capital that is free from the commercialized trappings of regular [feminine] television" (Santo, 2008, p. 34).

As Hassler-Forest (2014) notes, HBO QT aims to attract "a desirable global elite audience" promising its audience, regardless of their actual gender, to change their relationship to television "from 'passive,' 'feminine' spectatorship to that of an 'active,' and therefore 'masculine,' connoisseur" (p. 166). This strategy might explain the large number of young male fans of GoT globally. Around 82% of the English-speaking adult fans are male and around 90% are under the age of 44 (The ASOIAF Crypts, 2017). Similar numbers were presented to me in 2016 by GoT-OAP administrative staff showing that 80% of the page followers are male and 76% are under the age of 34.² However, Hassler-Forest assures that although GoT includes *Playboy*-inspired erotic scenes involving naked women, "the series makes sure that it caters to progressive tastes and female viewers by including many women characters in nontraditional gender roles, including Brienne, Arya, and Daenerys" (p. 170). The large number of scenes featuring naked women (e.g., there are 60 flashes of female breasts in the first five seasons) has provoked female audiences and actresses like Emilia Clarke to ask for gender equality in television nudity by disseminating the social media hashtag #FreeTheP ("*Game of Thrones* nudity," 2017).

While I am an Arab woman scholar who lives in the United States, I was struck to find a large fandom of GoT among Arabs in Arabic-speaking countries. Since 2014, I have observed rapidly growing Facebook Arab fan pages including GoT-OAP (over 240,000 followers), "Game of Thrones Arabs Fan Club" (over 88,700 followers), "Game of Thrones Arab Fans" (over 80,000 members), "Game of Thrones Fans-Syria" (over 64,000 followers), and "Game of Thrones-Iraq" (over 45,000 followers). Of these Arab fan pages, GoT-OAP is the largest and oldest. In the summer of 2016, I exchanged correspondence via Facebook Messenger with the GoT-OAP administrators expressing my interest in interviewing them.

To establish credibility, I included in my initial recruitment message a link to a biographical page about myself on a well-known bilingual (English/Arabic) academic e-zine where the administrators could check samples of my writing. While my communication efforts were welcomed, I did not learn the specific identity of those communicating with me. Those who chatted with me via the GoT-OAP Facebook Messenger account always used collective pronouns speaking in the name of the whole GoT-OAP administrative staff. I offered to conduct interviews via Skype or phone or to send the questions online. I was asked to message the questions to the administrators as a private message via the group's Facebook page. In response to my message, I received a 15-page, collectively authored letter signed by six members of the administration staff. The letter was written in standardized Arabic language and was structured as 20 answers to the 20 questions I had sent them.

² These numbers only reflect an estimation by the mentioned fan sites and are not generalizable for the larger fan and audience community of GoT.

It is worth noting that the administrators' anonymity is safeguarded throughout not only their communication with me but also most of their public posts on GoT-OAP. Two possible reasons for their choice to maintain anonymity are (a) the administrators of GoT-OAP act as an editorial board and have developed a formal or informal editorial policy of preferring to work under the anonymous collective identity of GoT-OAP to enhance the collective motivation and professionalism of the team and/or (b) although GoT-OAP generally steers away from politics, it still publishes political commentary, satire, and cartoons that tackle local politics in post-Arab Spring countries. Anonymity may be a self-preservation strategy for administrators located in politically unstable countries known for suppressing freedom of expression such as Egypt and Tunisia.

Arab Fandom of HBO's "Quality TV"

In his study of fan community within social networks, Jenkins (1992) defines organized fandom as "an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to it" (p. 88). GoT-OAP can be viewed as a form of organized fandom due to these fans' use of GoT to develop and organize an online community around the series and their interpretations and evaluations of it. In their coauthored letter, the administrators identified themselves as group of TV and cinema "geeks, nerds, gamers, and otakus" who are "obsessed Arab followers" of GoT, the novels it is based on, and the accompanying material such as soundtrack and podcasts.

The growth of American QT took off in the late 1990s, a moment of high media convergence and globalization in which television channels were highly concerned with retaining their most valuable audiences—affluent, highly educated consumers "who value the literary qualities of these programs" and "that advertisers were prepared to pay the highest rates to address" (Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 162). The GoT-OAP administrators fit the profile of HBO quality series' intended audience outlined by Polan (2007). They are highly skilled, tech-savvy professionals whose skills include translating texts from English to Arabic, fansubbing, video and audio editing, graphic design, and montage. Some members of the GoT-OAP administration staff also have experience in writing, reviewing, and editing as well as Web management and design. The coauthors of the 15-page letter I received are six members of the GoT-OAP administration staff³: Samer, a 29-year-old Tunisian man who has a college degree in law and works in a governmental organization inside Tunisia; Mounzer, a 26-year-old Tunisian man who has a college degree in computer engineering and works as a media engineer in a private company; Safauan, a 24-year-old Egyptian man who has a college degree in pharmacy and works as pharmacist in Egypt; Rami, a 36-year-old Egyptian man who has a college degree in civil engineering and works as an engineer in Saudi Arabia; Nabil, a 31-year-old Egyptian man who has a college degree in accounting and works as an accountant in Saudi Arabia; and Loubna, a 19-year-old Palestinian woman who is studying media and biotechnology and is an employee in a local store in the occupied Palestinian territories.

³ I use pseudonyms to refer to the GoT-OAP administrators.

The GoT-OAP administrators are not limited to these six members. As they clarified, there are around 10 active administrators, but the number is always subject to change based on the personal and professional schedule of the members. There is an open policy for joining the GoT-OAP administration staff; however, there are required qualifications that newcomers should possess such as writing, editing, translating, and designing skills that enable them to contribute effectively to the content production of the GoT-OAP.

Strategic and Engaged Audience

The GoT-OAP collectively authored letter, by six members of the administration staff, mentions that the page was cofounded on February 28, 2014,⁴ by the two Tunisian members (Samer and Mounzer). The other members joined later as supervisors. The letter includes three and half pages of testimony by the main founder of the page (Samer) that was made singular by the use of quotation marks. The letter and this singular testimony inside it come from what Anderson (1996) describes as a "strategic audience," a concept that is demonstrated by work such as that done by Radway (1984). Anderson clarifies that the "strategic audience concept shifts the emphasis from the autonomous individual to a collective, most often called an interpretive community" (p. 87). While the concept of strategic audience recognizes the collective community efforts of text interpretations, dissemination, and performance supervision, it also acknowledges that members of an interpretive community "are not equivalent units, as the normal political processes of membership are presumed. Some members will be more important than others, directing the others to both what to 'read' and how to read it" (Anderson, 1996, p. 87). Samer's testimony is a manifestation of such membership dynamics in collective work.

In his testimony, Samer recalls that on December 12, 2010, while he was a supervisor in a Tunisian online forum, he wrote about GoT for the first time in an article in a section of the forum about forging a promising upcoming television series.⁵ Samer recounts:

I remember that I wrote a short introductory article about GoT as one of the most anticipated series. Although at that time the show had only a pilot episode, I speculated a promising future for the show. After many years of watching foreign television serials, I was able to recognize what type of shows could become popular and successful. (personal communication, June 14, 2016)

Within online communities of foreign serials fans, Samer was recognized for his "expert" advice in similar ways to which Dorothy Evan, in Radway (1984), was known for hers within the offline communities of romance readers and publishers. During the first and second seasons of GoT, Samer watched the show and wrote commentaries about it in local online forums. It was not until the third season, when GoT became a "television phenomenon" in Samer's eyes, that he developed both his passion for the show and a large network of like-minded Arab fans who were publishing translations and explanations online in

⁴ This was nine weeks before the fourth season of GoT was broadcast in the United States on HBO, beginning on April 6, 2014 and concluding on June 15, 2014.

⁵ The first season of GoT broadcast on HBO between April 17, 2011, and June 19, 2011.

what, according to Samer, constituted an "Arabic encyclopedia" of the series. Samer was named "Maester" by his online, like-minded GoT fans, referring to Maesters in GoT who are a group of thinkers, scholars, scientists, and healers who study at the Citadel in Oldtown and then serve in different positions across the story's "Seven Kingdoms." The increasing global popularity of GoT, as well as the growing network of Arab fans, motivated Samer to think about social media as a venue for communicating with other fans. Samer writes:

I chose Facebook to be the platform from which I would create a huge page of GoT because it is the most important social media site in Tunisia. My aim was to publish on this page explanations of the show events so fans can be informed by them. Because I think if you only watched the show without the explanations, you would miss many fun details. (personal communication, June 14, 2016)

This was not the first time that Samer created a Facebook fan page; he has founded five previous pages concerning cinema and television serials. This was, however, the first time that he created a Facebook fan page devoted to a particular television series.

Samer outlines the main considerations at the early stages of cofounding the page. One consideration was choosing the page name. Samer and Mounzer wondered if they should use the English title of the show or an Arabic translation. Another consideration was the page's target audience. Although Samer and Mounzer conducted research to confirm that there were no existing Arabic Facebook pages for GoT fans at the time, they anticipated that they would be competing in the future with forthcoming parallel pages. Therefore, to target a large Arabic-speaking audience, regardless of nationality, they chose to use Modern Standard Arabic instead of Colloquial Arabic. The choice of Modern Standard Arabic allowed GoT-OAP to reach a large audience from different Arabic-speaking countries because Colloquial Arabic is different from one regional dialect to another. This choice of Modern Standard Arabic targets middle class, literate prospective fans who have a formal education in Arabic but who also know a little English, as some of GoT-OAP posts are in English or at least have English words, including the name of the page itself, which is written in English.⁶

Samer and the other members of the GoT-OAP administrators constitute an "engaged audience." An engaged audience is a "'declared' strategic audience openly practicing its strategies of interpretations in part to be recognized as a member" (Anderson, 1996, p. 88). In the beginning, the cofounders had administrative commitments to other websites and online forums. However, they soon discovered that if they wanted to improve the publishing quality and volume of the page, they not only needed to end their previous commitments with other online forums, but they also needed to recruit a talented team of fans who had skills in editing and designing. The recruitment of talent from private online fan forums increased the quality of the posts published at GoT-OAP. This progress attracted increasing numbers of general

⁶ It seems that most of the administrators watch GoT in English, and they coordinate with other fans, including the Arabic translator of the ASOIAF novels, to translate some of GoT materials to the larger audience of their page. They nevertheless publish some posts in English, which may be an indication of the administrators' assumption that many of their followers are familiar with English.

followers as well as talented volunteers who wanted to join the administration staff, including the Arabic translators of GoT. While we can describe the whole community of GoT-OAP—administrators and general followers—as a strategic audience, by *engaged audience* I mean specifically those members of the administration staff and loyal followers who contribute to the media production process of the page via, for example, supplying materials and contents. The engaged audience, represented by the administrators, acts as an editorial board in term of monitoring the tone and direction of the page. They are particularly encouraging of general fans' participation when it is connected to the aesthetics/content of GoT. For example, on the recent occasion of the group reaching 200,000 followers, the administrators asked their followers to design a Facebook cover photo for the GoT-OAP celebrating this occasion and the beginning of Season 7 on July 15, promising to publish the best poster along with the name of the winning fan (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Screenshot of a GoT-OAP post that celebrates reaching 200,000 followers and asks the page followers to design a Facebook cover photo honoring this occasion (posted June 8, 2017).

By the time the fifth season premiered on April 12, 2015, GoT-OAP was competing with other Arab Facebook fan pages of the show. GoT-OAP held its distinction over its competitors by promoting the page's reputation as the oldest and largest page of GoT Arab fans and by communicating with the Arabic translator of the ASOIAF novels, who became a friend of the page. By the beginning of the sixth season on April 24, 2016, the number of GoT-OAP doubled and the page content depended less on the administrators' contributions and more on the followers of the page, who sent their materials to the administrators via Facebook private messages. However, the collective identity of being Arab fans of GoT as a pleasurable (as opposed to a political) text is still dominant in the page, and one cannot distinguish between the posts that were designed by the administrators or by the followers of the page. To a large extent, the administrators' anonymity is maintained by not publishing a list of their names anywhere on the page. To recognize the originality of their posts from the posts they recirculate from other fan pages, the administrators imprint the name of their Facebook page on the visuals that they design/edit. However, one can identify the contributions of the page followers by reading them on the "comment" space where, similar to other Facebook pages, fans can post comments, including visuals, from their private accounts.

Samer's testimony illustrates the longing of GoT-OAP's engaged audience to belong to the global active audience of QT by choosing an English name for the page, recruiting a talented team of fans to increase their professionalism, and connecting with the Arabic translator of ASOIAF novels. Thus, their fandom appears to be a continuation of GoT fandom in the United States. The GoT-OAP engaged audience has an uncritical policy toward GoT that is generally celebratory of its pleasurable writing, acting, and cinematography. However, as Jenkins (1992) asserts, "Because the texts continue to fascinate, fans cannot dismiss them from their attention but rather must try to find ways to salvage them for their interests" (p. 24). At GoT-OAP there is no significant critical discussion of the orientalist nature of GoT as a text (Hardy, 2015), yet Arab fans find, through emotional realism and hybridity—as I demonstrate later in the article—ways to negotiate their fandom of GoT with their local contexts and lived experiences.

The Context of Arab Fandom

In term of their production, representation, and fandom, Western QT and the fantasy genre in general both have a reputation for whiteness (Laurie, 2015; Young, 2014). While fandom of local and international television in the Arab world is understudied, it is important, in particular to examine the ways in which Arab fans consume and interact with GoT, which is known as a "vehicle for fantasy Orientalism" (Hardy, 2015, p. 414) that places Eurocentric culture in a superior position to Eastern culture. In their coauthored letter, the administrators of GoT-OAP accurately identify Arab fandom around three types of television series: (a) fandom of Arabic popular television series such as *Bab Al-Hara* (a Syrian show *The Gate to the Neighborhood* in English) and *Hilmiyya Nights* (an Egyptian show); (b) fandom of Arabic-dubbed Mexican and Turkish television series such as *Hareem Elsultan* (*The Magnificent Century*) and *Wadi El Zeab* (*Valley of the Wolves*); and (c) fandom of English-language foreign series that had aired, such as *Lost* and *Breaking Bad*, or that are still presently airing, such as *The Walking Dead*.

These three types of fandom refer to three different types of media flow and audiences. First, fandom of Arabic popular television series is local within the Arab states and appeals to broad Arab audiences. Abu-Lughod (2005) explores the popularity of shows such as *Hilmiyya Nights* within the

context of what she calls the “national pedagogy of television,” which targeted audiences who are peasants and women as the main constituents for social reform, uplift, and modernization. Similarly, Al-Ghazzi (2013) sees that *Bab Al-Hara* (which belongs to the genre of the Damascene milieu) can be understood “as a project for imagining a new trajectory to modernity by celebrating ‘the old’ and constructing a national self-identity around it” (p. 588). These national television series described by Abu-Lughod and Al-Ghazzi target imagined general audiences including working class people. Shows such as *Bab Al-Hara* have huge fandoms but are denounced by educated Arab elites who accuse them of simplicity, historical inaccuracy, sexism, and backwardness.

Second, fandom of Arabic-dubbed Mexican and Turkish television series such as *Hareem El Sultan* (*The Magnificent Century*) and *Wadi El Zeab* (*Valley of the Wolves*) is connected to transnational media flow among non-Western nations. While Mexican television series have been popular in the Arab world since the late 1980s, Turkish television series did not become popular until 2008. Kraidy (1999) notes that in the case of Lebanon, dubbed Mexican telenovelas in Modern Standard Arabic have been a popular genre since the late 1980s, providing programmers with a cheaper alternative to local productions. They have “become part of an informal cultural ‘industry’ including clothing, music, gossip, and popular jokes” (p. 465). Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi (2013) argue that the appeal of Turkish television drama to Arab viewers arises because “social drama conjures up an accessible modernity that is not wholly taken from the West, and political drama enacts a counter-hegemonic narrative that puts Turks in particular and Middle Easterners in general in the role of heroes” (p. 18). Al-Ghazzi and Kraidy (2013) contend that, in targeting Arab audiences, Turkish television drama serves the Turkish government’s nation-branding efforts constructing the brand of “neo-Ottoman cool.”

Third, fandom of English-language foreign series is associated with transnational media flows from Western to non-Western nations. Class plays an important role in who the audiences are for English-language foreign series. Unlike the audiences of Arabic popular television and Arabic-dubbed Mexican and Turkish television series, the audiences of English-language foreign series belong to more educated classes resembling the characteristics of QT audiences in the United States. An early example of these audiences can be found in the ethnographic accounts that Kraidy (1999) collected from middle-class Maronites in Lebanon during the 1990s. These accounts showed that this group of Arab audience members did not identify with Mexican and Egyptian series, receiving the stories and characters as distant and irrelevant to their local class and cultural experiences. Kraidy’s fieldwork suggested that “American norms of production, writing, and acting were the standards by which interlocutors judged media programs” (p. 465). To understand such dynamics, Kraidy uses the concept of cultural hybridity and the term *glocalization* (coined from the intersection of globalization and localization and proffered by Robertson, 1992), in which hybridity is “an assertion of differences coupled with an enactment of identity, as a process which is simultaneously assimilationist and subversive, restrictive and liberating” (p. 473). This study provides insights into how a certain class of Arab audiences negotiates its admiration of English-language foreign series. In this article, I adapt Kraidy’s theorization to investigate Arab fandom phenomena of QT such as GoT. I show in the following analysis of figures, including Figures 5, 7, and 8, that Arab fans insert characters from their local culture to negotiate their affection of a predominantly Western series.

Fandom, Emotional Realism, and Politics

In their letter, the administrators of GoT-OAP identified three aesthetic reasons for the success of GoT in the Arab world: (a) the complexity and diversity of the ideas and philosophies in the show's story lines; (b) the high-quality production of the show, including battles filmed in natural locations such as Northern Ireland; (c) and the assembly of an exceptionally talented cast. However, the administrators wrote that, in their opinion, the main reason for GoT-OAP's success is that the themes it tackles "like religion, family, honor, marriage, sex, and blood are essential elements in our society, we see them around us, the characters bear a resemblance to us and what is around us." This sentiment resonates with Ang's (1985) concept of emotional realism as an interpretive strategy in the fan meaning-making processes in popular culture. Ang shows that Dutch fans of the show *Dallas* did not see the show as "empirically" true to upper-class Texans' real lived experiences; rather, they saw the show as "emotionally" true to the fans' lives: "the concrete situations and complications are rather regarded as symbolic representations of more general living experiences: rows, intrigues, problems, happiness and misery" (pp. 44–45). In this sense, while GoT belongs to the fantasy drama genre, the Arab engaged audience of the show represented by GoT-OAP administrators ascribed emotional realism to the show.

While in Ang's study there are no racial differences between *Dallas's* leading characters and the Dutch viewers, the same is not true about GoT and its Arab fans. In GoT, territories based on and filmed in the Middle East serve "as nothing more than an exotic backdrop for Western characters to progress through or else permit their interaction with . . . clichéd inhabitants and tropes" (Hardy, 2015, p. 410). Arab fans do not appear to identify with the show's orientalist stereotypes and tropes. Rather, they negotiate their fandom of a Western-oriented series by producing hybridized imagery that allows them to maintain their Arab identity and to maintain emotional realism. One way in which GoT Arab fans' sense of emotional realism in response to the series is demonstrated is in how they use the show to make connections between the themes of GoT and the current unrest across the Arab region. Because Egypt constitutes the largest country from which the page draws its followers, several political commentaries on GoT-OAP speak to Egyptian political life.⁷ For example, Figure 3 is a screenshot of a hybrid post that contrasts Egypt's current president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, to Daenerys Targaryen, a powerful lead character in GoT who sees reclaiming the Iron Throne as her birthright. The post depicts two images in vertical parallel. One image is of el-Sisi handing out a certificate to a student as other students around him reach their hands out to him. The other image is of Daenerys in the GoT third season finale. Daenerys's image is from the episode titled "Mhysa" and depicts her at the center of a human circle of freed slaves of Yunkai, whose brown hands reach out to touch white-blond Daenerys while hailing her as their "mhysa" (meaning *mother* in Ghiscari, a fictional language). This image and the sarcastic responses to it ridicule el-Sisi and his followers who, like Daenerys's followers, welcome a "conqueror" who pretends to be a "savior." It is worth noting here that Daenerys is the most disliked GoT character among many of the Arab fans. The most popular character in GoT-OAP is Arya Stark, the true heroine of GoT for many Arab fans.

⁷ It is also worth mentioning that most of the administrators are from Egypt and that Egyptian television drama is the most popular genre and the largest cultural production industry in the Arab world, which justifies why the hybridized images use Egyptian television characters.

Dislike for Daenerys is often accounted for in the following way: Unlike Arya who goes to Essos as a student (Essos is GoT's imagined geographical version of the Middle East), Daenerys is the female version of the imperial white savior who colonizes Essos. Thus, a negative Arabic nickname of Daenerys (*Ghalizi*, which means *vapid* in the Arabic Levant dialect and rhymes with "Khaleesi"⁸) is spread specifically among the followers of "Game of Thrones Fans-Syria." While GoT-OAP censors their page from negative comments, the dislike of Daenerys and her nickname *Ghalizi* can be observed by some commenters occasionally.⁹



Figure 3. Screenshot of a hybrid image that compares el-Sisi with Daenerys (posted July 24, 2016).

⁸ Khaleesi means the queen of the Dothraki and is a title that Daenerys gained when she married Khal Drogo in Season 1.

⁹ The dislike for Daenerys might be not because of her gender per se, but rather because of a mix of her white savior representation and of her being a strong authoritative woman. However, there are gendered posts on the page. For example, male fans often submit posts commenting on the beauty of the actresses, especially Sophie Turner who plays Sansa Stark. Some posts express respect for the character for never appearing nude.

Figures 4 and 5 are examples of the page's strategic audience interactions and how the followers of the page also attribute emotional realism to their reading of GoT. The posts in Figures 4 and 5 were published on the same day (November 3, 2016) and complement each other. In Figure 4, the GoT-OAP administrators posted a hybrid post of an image of Melisandre with a quote, "Egypt is dark and full of terrors." In the GoT universe, Melisandre is a priestess who worships a god called the Lord of Light. Melisandre has the ability to see mixed visions of past and future events in flames. Her quote, "The Night is dark and full of terrors," is a famous warning that the character repeats in different occasions throughout Seasons 2 through 6. The GoT-OAP action of substituting Egypt with "The Night" in Figure 4 is a culturally savvy move to communicate with other GoT savvy fans. Loyal fans of GoT knows that "The Night" does not refer to the regular daily time from sunset to sunrise; rather, "The Night" refers to the fictional period of winter. Unlike weather seasons in real life, winter and summer in GoT might last for decades and generally are associated with war (winter) and peace (summer). In this sense, Melisandre uses "The Night" in a twofold metaphorical sense to refer to two dark, warlike periods: the coming winter after an almost decade-long summer, and the past Long Night that lasted a generation almost 8,000 years before the current time in GoT. Thus, a GoT-savvy fan is expected to interpret this image as Egypt is now in the midst of frightening political strife.



Figure 4. Screenshot of a post that presents a picture of Melisandre from a GoT scene with an edited quote, "Egypt is dark and full of terrors."

In the hybrid post of Figure 5, the GoT-OAP administrators continue the story they started in Figure 4. The post depicts a scene from the episode "Battle of the Bastards,"¹⁰ in which Jon Snow—one of the series leading and most popular characters—fights Ramsay Bolton to liberate Winterfell, Jon's hometown that belongs to his defeated, aggrieved family House Stark. The GoT-OAP administrators wrote an Arabic caption: "The Egyptian citizen, but you love Jon Snow." On the image, which depicts Jon Snow raising his sword to face four warhorses among others that we do not see, the administrators wrote the following four issues, one over each warhorse: "Floating Egyptian pound," "Increasing gas prices," "Sugar crisis," and "Rising electricity prices." In the first comment to this post, the GoT-OAP administrators again posted their earlier hybrid image depicted in Figure 4. A fan of the GoT-OAP replied to the thread by uploading an image of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi sitting on the Iron Throne. Again, Figure 5 demonstrates the use of emotional realism by GoT Arab-savvy fans as an interpretive strategy to comment on their general daily life experiences including the living challenges that Egyptian citizens face currently. In the caption, "The Egyptian citizen, but you love Jon Snow," Jon Snow is not only an avatar for the Egyptian citizen, he is also a representation of Egypt. The hybrid post of the caption and the image of Jon Snow facing four warhorses communicates the meaning that the economic daily life conditions in Egypt are becoming unbearable due to the country's political leadership. The degrading economic conditions are blamed on the lack of el-Sisi's accountability and his corrupt political leadership. In sum, one can interpret GoT-OAP's affective reading of the "Battle of the Bastards" as drawing a parallel between its cruelty and the hardship of daily life in Egypt (and maybe in other countries in the Arab world such as Syria and Yemen).

¹⁰ "Battle of the Bastards" is the ninth episode of the sixth season of *Game of Thrones*.



Figure 5. Screenshot of a post that shows Jon Snow facing four warhorses with caption, “The Egyptian citizen, but you love Jon Snow” (posted November 3, 2016).

Kraidy’s (1999) concept of cultural hybridity as glocalization is exemplified in the ways in which GoT-OAP administrators manage censored content on their page. The administrators do not publish sexually explicit or violent scenes from the show, and they monitor posts that connect the themes of GoT to current unrest across the Arab region. Given the political sensitivity of posts such as Figure 3, it is interesting that the rule of keeping fan authors’ anonymity was waived in this case and the posts were published with authors’ names written in English. It is possible that this was an effort to manage accountability for political speech that could provoke negative fallout—directing any such fallout toward the poster rather than the page. However, in other cases such as Figures 4 and 5, GoT-OAP preserves anonymity. In fact, in their coauthored letter, the administrators of GoT-OAP explained that they try,

generally, to avoid posting materials on the page that directly link GoT to current politics, to ensure that followers from diverse political, tribal, religious, and ethnic backgrounds are not offended. They clarified, however, that there are exceptions to this rule, especially “when huge political events occur, we use the series to refer to and comment on such events in a comic style via publishing, for example, comic strips or comic video.” For example, after the U.S. election of Donald Trump, GoT-OAP published several posts like the one shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Screenshot of a post that refers to Donald Trump as “the mad president” with pictures of Trump and of Septa Unella chanting “Shame! Shame! Shame!” (posted November 9, 2016).

This post has a hashtag referring to Donald Trump as “the mad president,” inspired by a GoT character, “the Mad King,” whose reign brought instability and terror into the Seven Kingdoms. The post has also a picture of Trump with his name and title as President of the United States as well a picture from a GoT scene in which Septa Unella shouts “Shame! Shame! Shame!” during Queen Cersei’s walk of atonement.¹¹ This post can be read as GoT-OAP shaming the U.S. population for electing a “mad president” who evokes sentiments of instability and terror in the real world, similar to those known in the fantasy world of the Seven Kingdoms.

Finally, the GoT Arab fans’ sense of emotional realism in response to the series is not limited to the political. Many posts speak to Arab fans’ sense of Arab identity and racial difference. In a significant number of their nonpolitical comic posts, the GoT-OAP administrators use scenes from popular Egyptian movies and television series as well as pictures of beloved Egyptian actors and actresses to express their passion, anger, and frustrations. Figures 7 and 8 are examples of Arab fans’ engagement with GoT as a fantasy text that is known for its whiteness and Eurocentrism (Young, 2014). In response to the whiteness and Eurocentrism of GoT, Arab fans construct their distinctive fan identity by inserting beloved local television characters to represent them in imagined conversation with George R. R. Martin (e.g., Figures 7 and 8). As mentioned earlier, Arya Stark, a major character in GoT known for her perseverance and independence, is a favorite character for the administrators. Figure 7 is an expression of GoT-OAP’s fondness for Arya. Loyal fans of Arya know that Martin’s wife threatened that she would leave him if he killed Arya off (Harvey-Jenner, 2015). To convey their affection toward Arya, GoT-OAP administrators posted an image where they imagined a fictional conversation between Martin and his wife. However, they choose Abla Kamel, an Egyptian actress who is well known across the Arab world, to be Martin’s wife. Apparently, GoT fans chose three sequential scenes from an Egyptian show in which Kamel is having a conversation with her supposed husband. In the imagined conversation, Kamel—as Martin’s wife—threatens the writer to not kill off Arya unless he wants to sleep on the couch. Figure 8 is another example in which Arab fans’ sense of racial difference is used to negotiate their fandom of GoT. The hybrid posts in Figure 8 combine images of Martin and a Sa’idi¹² character. The Sa’idi character, who can be understood as a metaphor of GoT Arab fans, is complaining to Martin that he killed off all the heroes of the show.¹³

¹¹ This is from GoT fifth season finale titled “Mother’s Mercy.”

¹² A Sa’idi is a person from Upper Egypt, which is generally a rural region.

¹³ George R. R. Martin is known for killing off major characters in his novels. For example, Eddard Stark was killed in Martin’s first novel, *ASOIAF*, and thus in GoT Season 1.



Figure 7. Screenshot of a post that imagines the Egyptian actress Abba Kamel as the wife George R. R. Martin (posted December 9, 2016).



Figure 8. Screenshot of a post that imagines a conversation between George R. R. Martin and an Egyptian fan (posted November 9, 2016).

Affective Labor in Affective Economics

Given the fact of GoT-OAP's popularity (the administrators said in their letter that the reach¹⁴ of some posts can be around 1 million), one wonders if GoT-OAP makes any profit. In their coauthored letter, the administrators said that the success of GoT-OAP boosted the number of requests to join the administration staff as well as advertising offers from other pages and proposals to collaborate with other pages. However, Samer writes that while administrators study such offers, their motivation for the work is not based on potential profit but rather on their love for the series. "There is nothing better," says Samer, "than doing something that brings you joy. What brings us joy is what we do about this series with total love." Samer's comments emphasize pleasure, passion for GoT, and the joy of being part of fan community that shares this affect. In one part of the letter, the administrators collectively elaborated on their motivations for working at GoT-OAP:

Learning and sharing are our biggest motivations. The more people follow our page and engage with it, the more we feel contentment about what we do and the more we look for something new and beneficial for our followers. Our love for this series increases our passion and motivation for knowing its history and all related information. We do not want our research and the information we gather to be wasted; thus, GoT-OAP provides a forum for our collective efforts in which we share what we learned with our followers. (personal communication, June 14, 2016)

I do not want to undermine GoT-OAP's affective investments and the emotional alliance to GoT and their fan community. As Jenkins (2006b) affirms, "fan culture is dialogic rather than disruptive, affective more than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational" (p. 150). However, such an account must also recognize new developments in U.S. programming and marketing strategies which Jenkins (2006a) calls "affective economics." Affective economics refers to "a new configuration of marketing theory . . . which seeks to understand the emotional underpinning of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decision" (pp. 61–62). Samer did not confirm or deny any profitable revenue from GoT-OAP. However, a few observations suggest the possibility of profit revenue. In the GoT-OAP's "About" section (see Figure 9) there is a link to the official page of GoT episodes on the HBO website in addition to mentioning the name of the HBO Network and Season 6. This section is very hard not to view as a promotional effort by the page to advertise GoT as a commodity that meets HBO's ambitions to attract Arab audiences—especially since the new channel (OSN First HD—Home of HBO) was launched early in 2016 and allows regional Arab fans of HBO to see shows such as GoT the moment they debut.

¹⁴ *Reach* is a Facebook metric that means reaching people on Facebook on the page itself, within their news feeds, and as shared by friends.

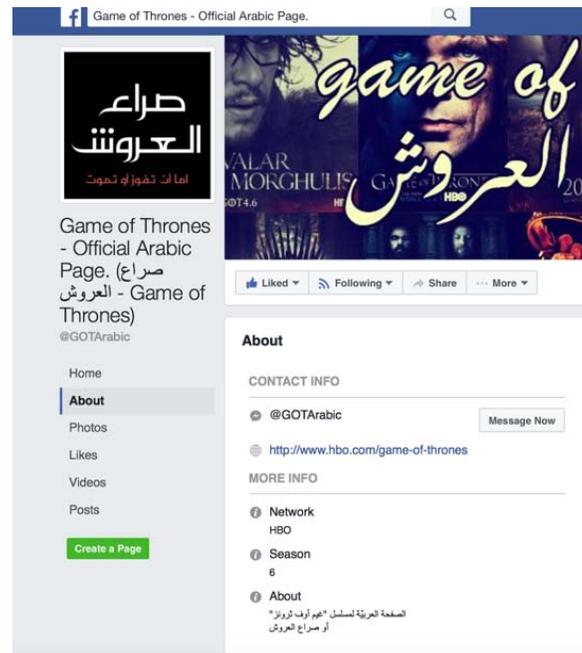


Figure 9. Screenshot of GoT-OAP's "About" section (taken December 15, 2016).

Facebook offers the administrators of any group page on the social network, such as GoT-OAP, a paid feature to promote their page and increase their post engagement. With a page that has more than 240,000 followers and post engagement of around 1 million, a profit revenue is a possibility if the page pays to use Facebook promotional features.

Even if GoT-OAP receives no revenue or profit for their affective labor, it is still the case that, as Andrejevic (2008) emphasizes, "creative activity and exploitation coexist and interpenetrate one another within the context of the emerging online economy" (p. 25). Today, social media enables firms to access personal information about people's consumption habits that was unsearchable before the rise of Web 2.0 technology such as Facebook. While Andrejevic emphasizes the coexistence of creative activity and exploitation in the emerging online economy, he pessimistically suggests that we have a situation of a participatory submission. I do not fully share Andrejevic's pessimistic view of fans' "interactivity" and online participation. However, I think his explanation of the double role that fans play in the commodification of new television productions provides an important insight into understanding the value of GoT-OAP's affective labor. Andrejevic argues that there is an exploitation of participation as a type of audience labor, in which there are dual, merging forms of the labor of audience participants. The dual forms of audience labor can be observed in "the effort viewers put into making the show interesting to themselves and the effort they devote to taking on the role of production assistants and attempting to provide feedback to writers and producers" (Andrejevic, 2008, p. 26). Even if GoT-OAP has no profit revenue (from HBO or Facebook), Andrejevic's dual form of labor can mean that GoT-OAP's engaged audience provides free labor contributing to making the show interesting for their followers (the marketing role) and creates a new commodity of content and feedback (the producers' role).

Conclusion

In this article, I explored the ways in which fan culture around GoT is produced in the Arab world through the case study of the GoT-OAP Facebook page. I focused on examining what it means to be an Arab fan and consumer of American QT. The collectively authored letter from the administrators as well as textual analysis of the page content provide insights into GoT-OAP as an online organized fandom which revolves around the series and the members' various interpretations and evaluations of it. The perspectives collected from GoT-OAP administrators show a longing to belong to the global active audience of QT by choosing, for example, an English name to the page and recruiting a talented team of fans to increase their professionalism and to target other educated GoT-savvy Arab fans. Thus, their fandom community appears to be a continuation of GoT fandom in the United States and a part of HBO quality series' intended audiences, represented specifically by the administrators—highly skilled, tech-savvy professionals. Class plays an important role in who becomes the audience of GoT, and thus GoT-OAP. These Arab audiences appear to be different both from the targeted Arab audiences of the “national pedagogy of television” that Abu-Lughod (2005) described and from the targeted audiences of the Damascene milieu genre that Al-Ghazzi (2013) studied. Both are less formally educated and are of a different, lower socioeconomic status than the intended audiences of American QT. GoT-OAP audiences do not seek an “accessible modernity” or a “counter-hegemonic narrative,” as do those fans of the Turkish television series featured in the work of Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi (2013). Rather they seek the pleasure of watching and interpreting global, award-winning quality shows, which are imagined “to revolve around rich and rounded figures who face moral dilemmas and either grow from the encounter or enable hip spectators to feel they have grown” (Polan, 2007, p. 264). GoT-OAP's administrators said that they sympathize with the GoT characters because there is “neither one evil character nor one hero character, all of them have elements of heroism and badness.”

The GoT-OAP community negotiates, constantly, the boundaries among being fans, media producers, and consumers of a show that features an overwhelmingly white cast, that is oriented in its production toward a Western audience, and that makes broad use of orientalist tropes. Through emotional realism and hybridity, Arab fans find ways to negotiate their fandom of GoT, with their local context and lived experiences making connections between the themes of GoT and the current unrest across the Arab region. As Jenkins (1992) notes, fandom is a mixture of both fascination and frustration. GoT-OAP celebrates GoT's pleasurable writing, acting, and cinematography and looks past the orientalist nature of GoT as a text. However, their frustration with the whiteness and Eurocentrism of GoT can be seen in how they construct their distinctive identity as Arab fans by inserting beloved local television characters who look like them to represent them in imagined conversation with George R. R. Martin. The hybrid posts I studied, political or nonpolitical, show that members of the GoT-OAP community—in assimilationist and subversive ways—select, interpret, and edit GoT-related cultural products according to their local context, their lived experiences, and their sense of racial difference. Finally, with HBO expanding its market in the Arab world, I contend that GoT-OAP produces labor (free or not) that contributes to the advertisement efforts of HBO to attract Arab audiences and to expand its market in the Arab world.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (2005). *Dramas of nationhood: The politics of television in Egypt*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Al-Ghazzi, O. (2013). Nation as neighborhood: How Bab al-Hara dramatized Syrian identity. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35(5), 586–601.
- Al-Ghazzi, O., & Kraidy, M. M. (2013). Turkey, the Middle East and the media. Neo-Ottoman Cool 2: Turkish nation branding and Arabic-language transnational broadcasting. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 2341–2360.
- Anderson, J. A. (1996). The pragmatics of audience in research and theory. In J. Hay, L. Grossberg, & E. Wartella (Eds.), *The audience and its landscape* (pp. 75–93). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Andrejevic, M. (2008). Watching television without pity: The productivity of online fans. *Television & New Media*, 9(1), 24–46.
- Ang, I. (1985). *Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*. London, UK: Psychology Press.
- Boulton, A. (2015, April 18). I can see why politicians love *Game of Thrones*. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/game-of-thrones/11545259/I-can-see-why-politicians-love-Game-of-Thrones.html>
- Busse, K., & Gray, J. (2011). Fan cultures and fan communities. In V. Nightingale (Ed.), *The handbook of media audiences* (pp. 425–443). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Game of Thrones* nudity: Study backs Emilia Clarke's call to #FreeTheP. (2017, April 23). *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/apr/23/game-of-thrones-nudity-emilia-clarke-freethep-hbo>
- Hardy, M. (2015). Game of tropes: The orientalist tradition in the works of G.R.R Martin. *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, 8(1), 409–420.
- Harvey-Jenner, C. (2015, July 15). The big reason Arya Stark won't get killed off *Game of Thrones* any time soon. *Cosmopolitan*. Retrieved from <http://www.cosmopolitan.co.uk/entertainment/interviews/a37208/arya-stark-maisie-williams-killed-off-game-thrones/>
- Hassler-Forest, D. (2014). *Game of Thrones*: Quality television and the cultural logic of gentrification. *TV/Series*, (6), 160–170.

- Hibbard, J. (2015, April 21). *Game of Thrones* piracy hits record high despite HBO's stand-alone service. *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved from <http://ew.com/article/2015/04/21/game-thrones-piracy-record/>
- Itzkoff, D. (2014, May 2). For "Game of Thrones," rising unease over rape's recurring role. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/03/arts/television/for-game-of-thrones-rising-unease-over-rapes-recurring-role.html?_r=0
- Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2006a). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006b). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Kraidy, M. M. (1999). The global, the local, and the hybrid: A native ethnography of glocalization. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 16(4), 456–476.
- Kraidy, M. M., & Al-Ghazzi, O. (2013). Neo-Ottoman cool: Turkish popular culture in the Arab public sphere. *Popular Communication*, 11(1), 17–29.
- Laurie, T. (2015, November). Serialising gender, breeding race: Biopolitics in *Game of Thrones*. Presented at Trans/Forming Feminisms: Media, Technology, Identity, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.
- Polan, D. (2007). Cable watching: HBO, *The Sopranos*, and discourses of distinction. In S. Banet-Weiser, C. Chris, & A. Freitas (Eds.), *Cable visions: Television beyond broadcasting* (pp. 261–283). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Radway, J. (1984). *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular culture*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Robertson, R. (1992). *Globalization: Social theory and global culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Santo, A. (2008). Para-television and discourses of distinction: The culture of production at HBO. In M. Leverette, B.L. Ott, & C.L. Buckley (Eds.), *It's not TV: Watching HBO in the post-television era*, (pp. 19–45). New York, NY: Routledge.

Shepherd, J. (2016, July 19). *Game of Thrones* season 6 ratings: Show brought in 25.1 million viewers on average per episode. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/game-of-thrones-season-6-ratings-show-brought-in-251-million-viewers-on-average-per-episode-a7144261.html>

The ASOIAF Crypts. (2017, January 10). The ASOIAF/GoT demographic survey results [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://atimecapsuleoficeandfire.wordpress.com/2017/01/10/the-asoiafgot-survey-results/>

Young, H. (2014). Race in online fantasy fandom: Whiteness on Westeros.org. *Continuum*, 28(5), 737–747.