Comparing Character Engagement:
A Study of Liked and Disliked Fictional Female Characters
and their Impact on Audience Enjoyment

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Abstract

The portrayal of fictional female characters in entertainment media, particularly television and film, continues to experience underrepresentation. Female characters often lack a personal identity and are depicted stereotypically. Because television continues to operate as an influential source of information and socialisation, the portrayal of women in entertainment impacts the perception and attitudes towards women in society. The present study examined to what extent the engagement with fictional female characters impacts the female audience's enjoyment and whether this differs between liked and disliked characters, whereby the show House of the Dragon was used as stimulus. In total, 192 female identifying viewers and fans of the show were randomly assigned to two groups through an experimental survey, whereby one focused on the female character they like and the other on the female character they dislike. All respondents completed an online questionnaire which measured perceived gender traits, recognisability, parasocial relationships, and their entertainment experience with the selected character.

Analyses revealed that liked female characters score higher on perceived leadership (e.g. rational, analytical) and affectionate traits (e.g. loving, tender), whereas disliked female characters showed higher perceived unpleasant traits (e.g. arrogant, power-hungry). In terms of recognisability, parasocial relationships, and entertainment experience, liked female characters scored higher on all levels. With liked female characters, perceived leadership, insecurity (e.g. naive, oversensitive), and affectionate traits, and attitudinal (e.g. approach to life), and personality recognisability (e.g. strengths, weaknesses) were significant positive predictors for parasocial trust friendship, whereas unpleasant traits showed a negative correlation. For parasocial support friendship, only perceived leadership traits and situational recognisability (e.g. past experiences) were significant positive predictors. Similar predictors including parasocial trust friendship were identified for captivating experience, however, the latter was the single positive predictor for meaningful experience. With disliked female characters, perceived affectionate traits, and attitudinal and situational recognisability were positive predictors for parasocial trust friendship, with the last two similarly affecting parasocial support friendship. Captivating experience showed positive correlations with perceived leadership, insecurity, and unpleasant traits, and personality recognisability. Similar predictors excluding unpleasant traits were identified for meaningful experience.

The findings reveal a more favourable impression of fictional female characters by the female audience when they depict traits embodying leadership and love, as well as a sense of vulnerability. Such portrayals contribute to the female viewers' familiarity and identification with female characters and the development of deeper relationships, positively affecting the entertainment experience. The outcomes indicate the importance of creating strong, complex, layered female characters with a personal identity in order for the female audience to experience a more intense engagement with and enjoyment of the characters and the show.

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Preface

With great pleasure and a sense of pride, I hereby present you with my master thesis titled *'Comparing Character Engagement: A Study of Liked and Disliked Fictional Female Characters and their Impact on Audience Enjoyment'*. The research process has been an incredibly fulfilling journey, which has allowed me to explore the field of entertainment and media effects. I am very pleased to have been given the opportunity to dive deeper into a topic that I have always found highly interesting.

This process would not have been as successful without the expertise, support, and enthusiasm from my supervisor, Dr. Julia Kneer. I am intensely grateful for your guidance and your dedication to me and my thesis project. Also, I would not have been able to complete this journey without the encouragement of my friends and family. They have been there during the high and lows, and I will be forever thankful for their presence.

This thesis represents the highlight of my academic journey, which commenced in 2021 when I decided to further my studies after working for two years as an entrepreneur in video production. Ever since finishing my bachelor's degree, I have always dreamed of obtaining my master's degree and I am very happy with my decision to take that next step. The past two years have been incredibly eye-opening, as I have grown on a personal, academic, and professional level. Hopefully, this thesis completes my academic journey.

Julia de Hek
Ridderkerk, June 21, 2023

1. Introduction

In both film and television, the portrayal of female characters continues to be underrepresented (Lauzen, 2022a; 2022b). According to a study by Lauzen (2022a), which focused on female characters in film, only 7% of the highest scoring films in 2021 portrayed more female characters than male characters. In television, approximately 50% of streaming programs portrayed important female characters and for broadcasters this concluded in 48% (Lauzen, 2022b). Moreover, there remains a distinction between the male and female fictional characters' portrayal, as the latter are more often stereotyped. Female characters are often younger, and their roles and purposes commonly revolve around their personal life and relationships (Ward & Grower, 2020; Lauzen, 2022a; 2022b). These portrayals in entertainment media affect the attitudes towards women in society, and uphold the narrative of female beauty and youth, and male achievements (Ward & Grower, 2020; Hailu, 2022).

Notably, the physical and personality attributes fictional female characters portray are important for the engagement with the audience, particularly the female audience. Previous research shows that consumers of entertainment media engage with fictional characters through identification, perceived similarity, biographic resonance, impression formation, or fascination, which could influence their entertainment experience and the development of relationships (Sanders, 2010; Tullmann, 2016; Zerebecki, 2022; Tukachinsky, 2011, Klimmt & Rieger, 2021). In entertainment, both likeable and unlikeable characters are portrayed, for instance in television shows such as Game of Thrones, Breaking Bad, The Handmaid's Tale, and Killing Eve. As discussed by Robinson (2019), unpleasant characters or villains play an important role in keeping the story interesting as they challenge the heroes or likeable characters and incite a sense of excitement and adventure within the viewer. For instance, Joffrey Baratheon, Cersei Lannister, and Ramsay Bolton (Game of Thrones) could be considered as one of the most disliked characters in television history (Payeur, 2022). However, this show would not have been as captivating without these characters, because unlikeable characters who commit immoral acts are perceived as curious entities by the viewer and encourage the viewer to try and understand the motivations behind these characters' actions (Robinson, 2019). Moreover, as Tian and Hoffner (2010) discuss, besides relationships with liked characters, viewers also develop relationships with characters they dislike, described with animosity and disdain. Furthermore, watching both likeable and unlikeable characters elicit particular emotions within the viewer, whereby the latter particularly evoke an emotional response known as fascination which is considered essential for the entertainment experience of the viewer (Markovic, 2012; Tullmann, 2016). This study

proposed to explore the female audience's perception of and engagement with female characters, and the extent to which this impacts their enjoyment of the characters. Here, a distinction between liked and disliked female characters was made to test for potential differences in terms of engagement and enjoyment.

Therefore, the study aimed to answer the following research question: *To what extent does character engagement with liked and disliked fictional female characters impact the entertainment experience?* For this research, the female characters from the HBO original series and Games of Thrones prequel House of the Dragon were used, as they are the prominent figures in the show's storylines and the overall narrative.

In order to explore the potential relationships between perceived gender traits, recognisability, parasocial relationships, and enjoyment, a quantitative approach was implemented (Sukamolson, 2007). Here, an experimental survey was conducted among female identifying fans and viewers of House of the Dragon to collect statistical data about their ideas, attitudes, and behaviours towards the female characters (Babbie, 2014; Berger, 2018). The survey was constructed using Qualtrics and consisted of scales developed by Berger and Krahé (2013), Zerebecki et al. (2022), Tukachinsky (2011), and Oliver and Bartsch (2010). Social media platforms such as Reddit, Facebook, and Instagram were used to share the survey and reach female fans and viewers of the fantasy show. Once sufficient data was collected, a two-way ANOVA, an independent samples t-test, and a hierarchical regression analysis were conducted using SPSS.

Importantly, this proposed study showed relevance in both the societal and academic context. With the outcomes of this research, more insight is presented into how female characters should be constructed in order for the female audience to engage more with them and therefore enjoy their portrayal and the overall entertainment piece. Furthermore, this is particularly interesting for the writers and producers of television shows, where the outcomes of the study could prove useful for developing fictional female characters. In terms of academic relevance, this study presented an alternative perspective on audience perception by including impression formation, which is mostly known in the context of real-life interactions. Furthermore, recognisability as the newly developed concept for studying familiarity with fictional characters was included as part of audience perception. For this concept, a scale had been developed which had not been used in other media effects research yet. Finally, by differentiating between liked and disliked characters, the study gives insight into how liked and disliked female characters contribute to the audience's enjoyment of them.

Following this chapter, an overview will be given of previous research on the importance of the portrayal of women in entertainment media and the role of impression formation and recognisability in the development of parasocial relationships with fictional characters, and how these ultimately influence the audience's entertainment experience. Then, the third chapter justifies the implementation of a quantitative approach and explains the sampling strategy, the procedure, the measurements, and discusses the preparation of the data whereby the validity and reliability are taken into account. Next, the results of the two-way ANOVA, the t-test, and the hierarchical regressions are presented in the fourth chapter. The final chapter consists of the conclusion, which presents a discussion of the results in connection to previous research. Furthermore, the implications of the results are discussed as well as the limitations of the research and suggestions for future studies.

2. Theoretical framework

In entertainment media, female characters continue to be portrayed in a more stereotypical light (Ward & Grower, 2020). As observed by Ward and Grower (2020), they are more commonly characterised through their looks and their actions in the context of relationships. Furthermore, they often lack attributes in terms of personality (Ward & Grower, 2020). The portrayal of women in media plays an important role in the audience's perception of women and the entertainment experience, particularly for the female viewers.

2.1 Impression formation of fictional characters

The consumption of media, specifically mass media, is understood as an important instrument in the process of socialisation. Here, the perceptions, attitudes, and actions of people are constructed through the consumption of particular media content, which affects their understanding of the world (Ramasubramanian & Murphy, 2014). In particular, the manner in which gender-roles are portrayed in entertainment media, such as television programs, affect the media consumers' attitudes towards the role of men and women in society (Ward & Grower, 2020). Television continues to act as a main source of information and socialisation in current society (Morgan et al., 2014). As Morgan et al. (2014) discuss, television provides stories about life through entertainment and projects an image of the world to "legitimise a particular social order" (p. 480). This oftentimes includes particular messaging about gender, race, power, and class (Morgan et al., 2014). Here, long-term exposure to such televised content is argued to have an effect on the viewer's conception of social reality, and their ideas and behaviour, also known as the cultivation theory (Morgan et al., 2014). Notably, there continues to be a distinction between the portrayal of male and female fictional characters, as the latter are more often stereotyped (Ward & Grower, 2020). As commonly observed by Ward and Grower (2020), the characterisation of female characters is often related to their beauty and looks. Also, their story often revolves around personal relationships, mostly romantic, whereby their actions are justified within this context (Ward & Grower, 2020). Furthermore, in terms of personality, female characters often lack attributes which give them more depth and a distinct identity apart from their relationships with others (Ward & Grower, 2020).

The portrayal of women in media plays an important role in the audience's perception of women and their entertainment experience, as well as the attitudes towards women in both the male and female viewers. As Ferguson (2012) examined, in the context of sexualised or violent media content, the depiction of strong or weak female characters result in differing

attitudes towards women. Here, female characters depicted as weak and passive are seen as negative portrayals of women and contribute to negative attitudes in both men and women as they stimulate negative stereotypes (Ferguson, 2012). In contrast, positive attitudes towards women are observed in the portrayal of strong, assertive female characters as they challenge stereotypes and present female viewers with potential role models (Ferguson, 2012). As argued by Ferguson (2012), the positive or negative depiction of women is more significant for the viewer's perception and behaviour towards women than the violent or sexualised context they are portrayed in.

Notably, fictional characters contribute to the audience's impression through the performance of particular characteristics, which could be described in terms of gender traits. Herein, the concept of self is examined through the elements of femininity and masculinity (Berger & Krahé, 2013). Through socialisation, certain favourable attributes are taught to the male and female sex, which contribute to the construction of personal identity (Berger & Krahé, 2013). Berger and Krahé (2013) argue that the self-concept contains both positive and negative attributes. In media effects research, viewers often construct the identity of a character by projecting their personal traits onto them (Zerebecki et al., 2022). However, focussing on assigning characters in terms of gender traits could establish more insight in the context of impression formation.

The impression formation of a character by the viewer is fundamental in establishing a "viewer-character connection" (Sanders, 2010, p. 148). The phenomenon of impression formation constitutes the process of examining and collecting information about an individual to develop an understanding of their identity (Sanders, 2010). This information includes attributes in terms of personality and physicality, beliefs, actions, values, among other elements (Sander, 2010). Similarly, viewers of entertainment media see fictional characters as other individuals with whom they could interact and sympathise (Klimmt et al., 2007). In accordance with how they perceive and evaluate these characters, the viewer forms an impression which could produce a particular relationship between the viewer and the character (Sander, 2010).

The engagement between viewer and media character is frequently observed through the concept of perceived similarity (Tukachinsky et al., 2020; Zerebecki et al., 2022). However, Zerebecki et al. (2022) argue that this is limited to finding resemblances in terms of demographic attributes, which challenges the engagement with characters from minority backgrounds. Therefore, Zerebecki et al. (2022) introduce the concept of recognisability, to consider more specific ways of engagement by concentrating on the characters' particular

aspects, such as personality, situations, and attitudes, which viewers could recognise within themselves. Here, recognisability is defined as "a sense of familiarity with a particular aspect of the character's on screen portrayal that the viewer experiences" (Zerebecki et al., 2022, p. 4). Recognisability differs from phenomena such as wishful identification, whereby an individual aims to become that character by transforming their appearances, attitudes, and other attributes (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Instead, recognisability is concerned with identifying and connecting the attributes of the character with themselves without altering their own person. Notably, this engagement approach could generate the creation of more significant relationships with media characters.

For this research, understanding the factors that contribute to the engagement between the female viewer and the fictional female character is of great significance. Concepts such as impression formation and gender traits shed light on the perceptions that are constructed of fictional female characters, which could determine a potentially favourable or unfavourable impression within the audience. Furthermore, recognisability provides an insight into the level of identification and relatability that a female viewer experiences with a fictional female character, which contributes to this engagement as well.

2.2 Parasocial relationships

In the field of media effects research, the concepts of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship continue to be of interest. Even though these terms are often used interchangeably, there is a distinction to be made. Parasocial interaction, as coined by Horton and Wohl (1956), constitutes the interaction between the media viewer and the media performer, where the performer is perceived as an "intimate conversational partner" (Dibble et al., 2016, p. 21) by the viewer. The perception of a communicative back-and-forth occurs while watching the mediated performer and is more significant when the performer faces the viewer directly, for instance by looking into the camera (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Dibble et al., 2016). Whereas parasocial interaction is limited and specifically occurs while watching the performer, a parasocial relationship moves beyond this.

Horton and Wohl (1956) apply the term parasocial relationship when the viewer imagines having an interpersonal relationship with the mediated performer. These parasocial relationships occur in the long-term context and progress outside of the observed media content (Dibble et al., 2016). Here, the viewer would discuss the performer in a manner which portrays them as part of their family or friend group (Horton & Wohl, 1956). They experience this relationship with emotional aspects similar to real social relationships,

however missing the behavioural elements (Giles, 2002; Cohen, 2009). For instance, when a fictional character's run ends as a result of the television show ending, the viewer experiences negative emotions during a parasocial breakup (Cohen, 2009). Besides parasocial relationships in the friendship context, romantic relationships with media performers also occur (Tukachinsky, 2011). Here, the viewer experiences love and sexual attraction in relation to the performer, which could elicit more intense emotions within the viewer (Tukachinsky, 2011).

As observed by Lacalle et al. (2021) and Bond (2021), a factor that significantly influences the strength of the parasocial relationship is perceived similarity. Viewers who identify with the fictional characters and recognise similar attributes within themselves are more inclined to initiate a parasocial relationship (Lacalle et al., 2021). Moreover, this identification strengthens the relationship (Bond, 2021). Notably, gender plays an important role in the establishment of parasocial relationships. Women are considered to be more invested in relationships and therefore more inclined to establish strong parasocial relationships with fictional characters in comparison to men (Cohen, 2009; Lacalle et al., 2021). This particular study will focus on parasocial relationships in the context of friendships.

In studying the female audience's engagement with and enjoyment of fictional female characters, the occurrence of parasocial relationships is an important factor. These deeper connections are influenced by the perceptions constructed by the audience while watching and engaging with fictional characters. The association between impression formation and parasocial relationships allows for an understanding and exploration of the female viewers' engagement and enjoyment processes with female fictional characters.

2.3 Enjoyment of the characters

The consumption of entertainment is often sought for enjoyment purposes (Oliver & Raney, 2011; Wirth et al., 2012). However, enjoyment is understood as a more positive motivation while entertainment could also be consumed for more meaningful purposes (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Wirth et al., 2012). Here, hedonic and eudaimonic motivations come into play. In the hedonic context, entertainment media such as movies and television programs are consumed for seeking pleasure, suspense, or happiness (Wirth et al., 2012). As Wirth et al. (2012) discuss, hedonic well-being is focused on the presence of positivity rather than negativity and is experienced when pleasure matches the satisfaction of the entertainment consumer's needs. Therefore, hedonic well-being is

understood as "outcome-oriented" (Wirth et al., 2012, p. 408). In the eudaimonic context, entertainment is consumed with the purpose of gathering insight into the meaning of life and the purpose of human existence (Wirth et al., 2012; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). As discussed by Wirth et al. (2012), eudaimonic well-being is focused on the potential of humans and their favourable qualities. Here, the entertainment experience is much more meaningful.

Building on the experience of meaningfulness in eudaimonic entertainment, Klimmt and Rieger (2021) have conceptualised this experience on an intensely individual level as biographic resonance. Klimmt and Rieger (2021) define biographic resonance as the emotional experience of the consumer of entertainment when a connection is perceived between their personality, their history, their current situation, and their prominent life questions, and the consumed entertainment content. They propose that individual audience members have their own "personal biography" (Klimmt & Rieger, 2021, p. 3) which they carry with them during their entertainment consumption (Klimmt & Rieger, 2021). Here, meaningfulness is experienced when the individual perceives some component of the message within the entertainment content as resonating with their personal biography (Klimmt & Rieger, 2021). Moreover, from this message, they have the ability to obtain advice or some direction for managing certain aspects pertaining to their life (Klimmt & Rieger, 2021). As Klimmt and Rieger (2021) discuss, there are multiple forms of biographic resonance, however, the most familiar relates to characters within the entertainment piece. In the context of fictional and non-fictional entertainment, the consumer is able to see the characteristics of the portrayed media character. Here, similarities between the consumer and the character could be perceived in terms of visible characteristics such as appearance, as well as less apparent characteristics such as personality traits (Klimmt & Rieger, 2021).

The characters portrayed in entertainment media are important for the enjoyment of the entertainment experience. Here, both likeable and unlikeable characters could elicit emotions and feelings within the audience members when viewing a particular story. In the context of art, Markovic (2012) discusses that an entity, both pleasant and unpleasant, should predominantly be interesting and stimulating in order for the perceiver to have an aesthetic experience. Here, an aesthetic experience constitutes an unique "subject-object relationship" (Markovic, 2012, p. 1) whereby the subject's mind is occupied with the particular object, causing one to disregard current objects and situations in their environment. Furthermore, Markovic (2012) argues that objects and events which are experienced as aesthetic are inherently different from everyday objects and events. This introduces the significance of

fascination with an entity, which is an essential characteristic of the aesthetic experience (Markovic, 2012).

Notably, this theorisation similarly applies to fictional characters in entertainment stories. As Tullmann (2016) states, fascination is an emotional response, which occurs with fictional characters who are perceived as "attractive, interesting curiosities" (p. 125). These characters display certain behaviours and attributes which the audience members find intriguing, as they rarely engage with such eccentrics in their personal life (Tullmann, 2016). Tullmann (2016) argues that fascination is fundamental in garnering sympathy and supportive attitudes towards fictional characters, especially in the context of unpleasant or unlawful characters.

The aforementioned concepts deliver a deeper understanding of the factors and processes reinforcing the viewers' enjoyment of female fictional characters. Together with impression formation, recognisability, and parasocial relationships, these concepts allow for an examination of the forces between fictional female characters and the female viewers. Importantly, this could deliver an understanding of the groundwork for creating fascinating female characters, which could improve the engagement with and enjoyment of these characters.

2.4 Hypotheses

As discussed, the audience's enjoyment of fictional characters and the overall entertainment experience occurs in two different contexts: pleasure and meaningfulness, also known as hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment experiences (Oliver & Raney, 2011; Wirth et al., 2012). The primary focuses on experiencing pleasure, happiness or suspense as well as satisfying the media consumer's needs. Whereas the latter focuses on consuming certain entertainment content to understand the meaning of life and human existence, whereby the consumer also implicates their personal biography (Oliver & Raney, 2011; Wirth et al., 2012; Klimmt & Rieger, 2021). Markovic (2012) and Tullmann (2016) argue that for an art piece such as a fictional character to be enjoyed, the consumer should have an aesthetic experience. Here, fascination plays an important role where the consumer perceives particular eccentric attributes within the character and generates sympathy and support for them (Markovic, 2012; Tullmann, 2016). Therefore, the following hypothesis is stated.

> **H1:** *Liked female characters score higher on a) meaningful and b) captivating experience than disliked female characters.*

While watching a fictional character, the viewer constructs a perception of that character by processing their characteristics, attitudes, personality, among other attributes, to develop an identity and idea about the character (Berger & Krahé, 2013; Sanders, 2010). This process evolves when the viewer perceives the fictional character as a person to interact with and particular attributes are witnessed within the character that are similar to one's own person (Klimmt et al., 2007; Tukachinsky et al., 2020; Zerebecki et al., 2022). With this process of identification, a relationship could develop that moves beyond the content which grows on a deeper level, creating an attachment between the viewer and the fictional character and affecting the viewer's emotions (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Dibble et al., 2016; Tukachinsky, 2011). These phenomena contribute to the entertainment experience of media consumers, particularly the enjoyment of fictional characters. Therefore, the following hypotheses are stated.

> **H2:** *Captivating experience with female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, g) trust and h) support friendship, and decreases with perceived i) unpleasant traits.*

> **H3:** *Captivating experience with liked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, g) trust and h) support friendship, and decreases with perceived i) unpleasant traits.*

> **H4:** *Captivating experience with disliked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, g) trust and h) support friendship, and decreases with perceived i) unpleasant traits.*

> **H5:** *Meaningful experience with female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, g) trust and h) support friendship, and decreases with perceived i) unpleasant traits.*

> **H6:** *Meaningful experience with liked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal*

recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, g) trust and h) support friendship, and decreases with perceived i) unpleasant traits.

H7: *Meaningful experience with disliked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) affectionate traits, c) attitudinal recognisability, d) situational recognisability, e) personality recognisability, f) trust and g) support friendship, and decreases with perceived h) insecurity traits, and i) unpleasant traits.*

The impression formation of fictional characters and therefore the perceived identity of such characters could be established through the attachment of gender traits (Sander, 2010; Berger & Krahé, 2013). Ferguson (2012) argues that strong and assertive female characters are observed as positive portrayals of women, whereas weak and passive female characters are perceived more negatively. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H8: *Liked female characters score higher on a) leadership and b) affectionate traits and lower on c) insecurity and d) unpleasant traits than disliked female characters.*

Then, Zerebecki et al. (2022) introduce the concept of recognisability to conceptualise the sense of familiarity and resemblance the viewer experiences when witnessing a character being displayed with comparable attributes in terms of personality, situation, and attitude. The impression formation constituting the perception of a character also contributes to this (Sanders, 2010; Berger & Krahé, 2013; Klimmt et al., 2007). It is argued that this sort of engagement could generate significant relationships with media characters (Zerebecki et al., 2022). Parasocial relationships embody these significant relationships, where the viewer considers the mediated performer to be their friend and this engagement progresses on the long-term outside of the media content (Tukachinsky, 2011; Dibble et al., 2016). Therefore, the following hypotheses are stated.

H9: *Liked female characters score higher on a) attitudinal recognisability, b) situational recognisability, and c) personality recognisability than disliked female characters.*

H10: *Liked female characters score higher on a) trust and b) support friendship than disliked female characters.*

H11: Trust friendship with female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, and decreases with g) perceived unpleasant traits.

H12: Trust friendship with liked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, and decreases with g) unpleasant traits.

H13: Trust friendship with disliked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) affectionate traits, c) attitudinal recognisability, d) situational recognisability, e) personality recognisability, and decreases with f) insecurity traits and g) unpleasant traits.

H14: Support friendship with female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, and decreases with g) unpleasant traits.

H15: Support friendship with liked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, and decreases with g) unpleasant traits.

H16: Support friendship with disliked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) affectionate traits, c) attitudinal recognisability, d) situational recognisability, e) personality recognisability, and decreases with f) insecurity traits and g) unpleasant traits.

3. Methodology

The aim of this research was to examine to what extent character engagement with fictional female characters impacts the female audience's enjoyment of these characters and whether there is a difference between liked and disliked characters. Herein, the focus lied on studying potential relationships and testing hypotheses, whereby a quantitative approach was fundamental (Sukamolson, 2007). With quantitative research, phenomena perceived as occurring in social reality are able to be studied within a sample in order to make inferences about a population (i.e. female fans/viewers of House of the Dragon), using statistical data (Sukamolson, 2007). Through the collection and analysis of statistical data, quantitative research allows for testing potential relationships between variables (Babbie, 2014). In the context of this research, the variables under study (i.e. gender traits, recognisability, parasocial relationships, and enjoyment) were not numerical in nature, therefore survey research was implemented. This enabled the gathering of information regarding the sample of entertainment consumers that represent the overall population of the study, in terms of their ideas, attitudes, and behaviours towards the female characters (Berger, 2018). Here, a questionnaire was used (see Appendix A) which presents a structured list of standardised questions and answer categories that produces statistical data about people and their experiences, opinions, and ideas (Marshall, 2005). With this method, non-numerical phenomena were rated in order to collect statistical data (Sukamlson, 2007).

Notably, the goal of this research also included the comparison of groups (i.e. liked and disliked characters), which is also supported within survey research (Sukamolson, 2007). A between-group experiment was added, whereby one group focused on the female House of the Dragon-character they liked and the other group focused on the female character they disliked, while answering similarly structured questionnaires to test for differing outcomes (Neuman, 2011). This study used Qualtrics as the software for assembling and publishing the questionnaire, as well as for processing the data. This software program enabled random assignment of participants, therefore allocating each participant to the liked or disliked-group and creating two comparable groups, as distinctive groups could affect the outcomes needed for comparison (Neuman, 2011).

In order for the questionnaire to garner data in relation to the concepts and phenomena which are relevant to the current research question and hypotheses, this method demanded significant preparation (Marshall, 2005). Therefore, the primary version of the questionnaire was tested among 10 master students to determine the clarity, logic, and structure of the questions. Consequently, the concept of recognisability was formulated differently in order to

be understandable and the formulation of the items within this scale was altered to support the readability towards the participant while staying close to the original content.

The questionnaire was constructed through the implementation of several established scales from the literature which measured the concepts central to this study. Once sufficient data was gathered for analysis, the data was initially prepared using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). This type of structural equation modelling pertains to the correlation between items and factors, also known as observed and latent variables within a measurement model (Brown & Moore, 2012). CFA is a fundamental analytical tool in determining the construct validity of a scale as this aims to establish latent variables (i.e. factors) that explain the difference between a cluster of observed variables (i.e. items) (Brown & Moore, 2012). The use of CFA demands a solid theoretical basis, and evidently this study predominantly used established measurement models from literature (Brown & Moore, 2012).

As stated in the hypotheses, this study aimed to test potential differences between the liked and disliked character groups in terms of perceived traits, recognisability, parasocial relationships, and enjoyment, and to test the potential correlation between these variables. Initially, the difference between the two groups in the context of the aforementioned variables was tested with a t-test. As Sawyer (2009) states, this statistical tool "is used to infer on statistical grounds whether there are differences between group means for an experimental design with (i) one parametric dependent variable and (ii) one independent variable with two levels" (p. 29). In this case, the randomised groups embodied the independent variable consisting of two groups. Furthermore, a two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. This tool enables the detection of differences between more than two group averages (Sawyer, 2009). In this case, two independent variables each consisting of two groups were tested against one dependent variable in order to test for an interaction effect, resulting in a 2x2 ANOVA (Sawyer, 2009). Importantly, this analytical tool requires normally distributed data within the groups (Sawyer, 2009). Therefore, the collected data was firstly tested for normal distribution before initialising the ANOVA.

Then, the potential correlation between variables was tested using hierarchical regression analysis. As stated by Lewis (2007), this form of regression analysis is suitable when analysing the effect of predictor variables that are known to be correlated. Theory shows that gender traits, recognisability, parasocial relationships, and enjoyment have an effect on each other. Therefore, hierarchical regression analysis was used to analyse whether particular variables had a significant effect on a particular dependent variable after initially testing the effect of the other variables (Lewis, 2007).

3.1 Sampling strategy

Notably, the HBO original series House of the Dragon was used as stimulus as the female characters are prominent figures in the show's narrative. Therefore, the study focused on viewers and fans of the show. Particularly, the female audience was of interest as they were considered to have more engagement with the female characters. Also, because of the international reach of the entertainment piece, the sample aimed to include international viewers. Therefore, the target population of this study was international viewers and fans of the show House of the Dragon who identified as female. In order to make inferences about the population, the researcher used non-random sampling, more specifically purposive sampling, to select participants who fit the criteria (i.e. female identifying viewers and fans of the show, who had seen the first season in its entirety) and create a representative sample. The sampling and data gathering process lasted approximately six weeks and included several methods.

Firstly, the researcher utilised social media platforms to reach viewers and fans of the show. Specifically Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Tumblr, Twitter and TikTok were used, because these platforms include fan-groups and pages, subreddits, and blogs devoted to the show. These platforms support public conversation about the show and enabled the researcher to gain insight into the thoughts and ideas of viewers and fans pertaining to the show, therefore the survey was shared on these online platforms.

Unfortunately, this method presented a low response rate at first. Therefore, social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram were also used to directly message fan-accounts, entertainment media outlets, and people involved in the production of the show (e.g. actors), requesting them to share the survey. This method proved effective as a few fan-accounts showed support for the research and shared the survey on their respective channels, consequently improving the response rate.

Another method that was implemented to improve the response rate consisted of uploading the survey on survey platforms such as SurveySwap and SurveyCircle, where other researchers and students actively share their survey studies and encourage users to participate in other surveys as well. However, this proved to be ineffective for this research and was therefore cancelled after a few weeks. Importantly, the first method involving social media platforms was repeated several times and eventually contributed to the collection of data.

A total of 548 respondents were recorded. After the process of data cleaning, a total of 192 respondents were determined as valid and useful for analysis. The final sample ($N = 192$) consisted of $n = 105$ respondents assigned to the liked-group and $n = 87$ respondents assigned

to the disliked-group. In total, the most frequently selected female character was Alicent Hightower (35.4%), followed by Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen (27.6%) and Princess Rhaenys Targaryen (20.3%). Notably, the respondents in the liked-group most commonly selected Princess Rhaenys Targaryen (31.4%), and Alicent Hightower (44.8%) was most often selected in the disliked-group. The average age of the respondents was 27.33 ($SD = 7.77$; range = 18-52). Furthermore, most of the respondents identified as White (62.5%), followed by Asian (12.5%) and some other ethnicity (9.9%). The most common country of origin was the United States of America (26.6%), followed by the Netherlands (10.9%) and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (10.4%). In terms of education, most of the respondents obtained a Bachelor's degree (45.3%), followed by a highschool diploma (28.6%) and a graduate or professional degree (25.5%). Finally, 85.9% of the respondents had watched all 8 seasons of Game of Thrones.

3.2 Procedure

The participants were asked to fill in an online questionnaire which would take approximately 8 to 10 minutes to complete. Initially, the participants were informed about the topic of the study with a brief introductory text. Here, a consent form was included which asked the participant to determine whether they understood the terms and conditions of the study. The participants who gave their consent were then presented with the first filter question, which asked them to state whether they identify as female. This filter question ensured that the participants fit the previously determined sample by sending non-female identifying participants to the end of the questionnaire. Then, the female identifying participants were presented with the second filter question which asked them whether they had watched the complete first season of the HBO original series House of the Dragon. Only the participants who had seen the first season in its entirety were then randomly assigned to the liked or disliked-group, to ensure that the participants were familiar with the portrayal of the fictional female characters on the show. The participants in the liked-group were asked to pick the female character from House of the Dragon they like, whereas the disliked-group were asked to pick the female character they dislike.

Following this first section, the participants moved on to answer Likert-scale based questions towards their selected character. Firstly, they were presented with 24 gender traits and asked to state the extent to which they find each trait characteristic of their selected character. Then, the participants answered a total of 20 questions concerning recognisability, where they indicated whether they recognised similarities between them and their chosen

female character. Next, the participants were presented with 13 questions related to parasocial relationships where they would state to what extent they agree with the statements. Then, the participants were asked 12 questions related to their entertainment experience and enjoyment of the character, which included both the hedonic and eudaimonic categories.

After completing the Likert-scale based questions, the participants were presented with several questions regarding demographics. Here, they firstly stated their age in numbers via an open-question. In order to gather more insight into the participants' cultural backgrounds, they were then asked to indicate their ethnicity through a list of categories. Next, the participants stated their nationality by choosing their country of origin from a list representing 195 countries. Then, the participants were presented with a question regarding their level of education, where they were asked to indicate their highest obtained degree through a categorical list. Lastly, in order to finish the questionnaire on-topic, the participants indicated whether they had seen all 8 seasons of Game of Thrones.

Once the participants completed the questionnaire, they were presented with a final message in which the researcher showed appreciation for the participant's time and effort.

3.3 Operationalisation

As part of preparing the questionnaire, the main concepts of the study were operationalised through established scales which have previously been used in research. Notably, the Minority Character Recognisability Scale (Zerebecki et al., 2022) was recently developed and was therefore considered a novel scale in this research.

Gender traits. For impression formation, gender traits were applied to the character using the Positive-Negative Sex-Role Inventory scale by Berger and Krahé (2013), which comprised 24 items. These items included positive masculine traits (e.g. analytical, rational), negative masculine traits (power-hungry, arrogant), positive feminine traits (e.g. empathic, passionate), and negative feminine traits (e.g. naive, self-doubting). Participants were asked to determine whether each trait was characteristic of their fictional female character on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *1 = not at all characteristic of [character]* to *5 = totally characteristic of [character]*.

Recognisability. Recognisability was measured using the Minority Character Recognisability Scale (MRS), recently developed by Zerebecki et al. (2022), consisting of 20 items. The items included statements such as *'I recognise the weaknesses of [character] as weaknesses that I have'* and *'I recognise the past experiences of [character] as similar to my past experiences'*. Here, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with

each statement through a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *1 = strongly disagree* to *7 = strongly agree*.

      Parasocial relationships. The concept of parasocial relationships was measured using the Multiple-PRS scale by Tukachinsky (2011) with 13 items from the friendship sub-scales. The items included statements such as *'If [character] was a real person, I could have disclosed a great deal of things about myself to [character]'* and *'Sometimes, I wish I could ask [character] for advice'* and the participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement for each statement on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *1 = strongly disagree* to *7 = strongly agree*.

      Hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment. The viewer's enjoyment of the character was measured through the hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment experience using the 12 items by Oliver and Bartsch (2010). These items contained statements such as *'I know I will never forget [character]'* and *'It was fun for me to watch [character]'*, whereby participants were asked to state their level of agreement via a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *1 = strongly disagree* to *5 = strongly agree*.

3.4 Data preparation

      Before gender traits, recognisability, parasocial relationships, and entertainment experience were included in further analyses, the scales consisting of a wide range of single items were evaluated in terms of validity and reliability through a factor analysis. Firstly, the 24 items of gender traits which were Likert-scale based were entered into a confirmatory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation and fixed number of factors set on 4, *KMO* = .84, X^2 (*N* = 191, 276) = 2230.99, *p* < .001. The resultant model explained 60.2% of the variance in 'Gender traits'. Factor loadings of individual items onto the four factors are presented in Table 1. The following factors were found.

      Leadership traits. The first factor included 7 items about leadership traits such as being *analytical*, and *solution-focused*.

      Insecurity traits. The second factor included 8 items about insecurity traits such as *self-doubting*, *naive*, and *sensitive*.

      Unpleasant traits. The third factor included 6 items about unpleasant traits such as being *arrogant*, *loud*, and *inconsiderate*.

      Affectionate traits. The fourth factor included 3 items about affectionate traits such as being *loving* and *tender*.

Table 1. Factor loadings, explained variance and reliability of the four factors found for the scale 'Gender traits'. (*N* = 192)

	Leadership traits	Insecurity traits	Unpleasant traits	Affectionate traits
Logical	.79			
Analytical	.79			
Rational	.76			
Practical	.72			
Solution-focused	.69			
Objective	.62			
Empathic	.53			
Anxious		.82		
Self-doubting		.72		
Oversensitive		.67		
Emotional		.64		
Disoriented		.64		
Naive		.56		
Overcautious		.54		
Sensitive		.53		
Arrogant			.81	
Bragging			.80	
Power-hungry			.70	
Loud			.67	
Inconsiderate			.67	
Harsh			.53	
Loving				.83
Passionate				.74
Tender				.73
R^2	.27	.15	.09	.08
Cronbach's α	.87	.81	.84	.78

Note. All factors included *N* = 191, 1 excluded.

Then for recognisability, the 20 items which were Likert-scale based were entered into a confirmatory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation and fixed number of factors set on 3, $KMO = .94$, X^2 ($N = 192$, 190) = 3007.28, $p < .001$. The resultant model explained 69.5% of the variance in 'Recognisability'. Factor loadings of individual items onto the three factors are presented in Table 2. The following factors were found.

Attitudinal recognisability. The first factor included 8 items about attitudinal recognisability such as recognising the character's approach to life as similar to one's own approach to life.

Situational recognisability. The second factor included 7 items about situational recognisability such as recognising one's life in the character's life and recognising similar past experiences.

Personality recognisability. The third factor included 5 items about personality recognisability such as recognising the character's strengths and weaknesses as similar to one's own strengths and weaknesses.

Table 2. Factor loadings, explained variance and reliability of the three factors found for the scale 'Recognisability'. ($N = 192$)

	Attitudinal recognisability	Situational recognisability	Personality recognisability
I recognise [character]'s opinions about what is good and bad as opinions I have.	.85		
I recognise [character]'s opinions about social problems as opinions I have.	.85		
I recognise the solutions to problems of [character] as solutions I could follow.	.81		
I recognise [character]'s opinions about other people as opinions I have.	.81		
I recognise [character]'s approach to life as an approach to life that I have.	.73		
I recognise the decisions of [character] as decisions that I could make.	.73		
I recognise the thought processes before decisions of [character] as thought processes I have.	.72		

Table 2. Continued

	Attitudinal recognisability	Situational recognisability	Personality recognisability
I recognise the behaviours of [character] as behaviours that I could show.	.59		
I recognise the problems that [character] has as problems that I could have.		.81	
I recognise the places in which I see [character] as the places I could be in.		.79	
I recognise the past experiences of [character] as similar to my past experiences.		.78	
I recognise the situations that [character] encounters as situations that could also happen to me.		.76	
I recognise my life in the life of [character].		.75	
I recognise the life changes [character] experiences as life changes that could happen to me.		.60	
I recognise the topics that [character] discusses with others as topics I could discuss with other people in my life.		.44	
I recognise the weaknesses of [character] as weaknesses that I have.			.77
I recognise the personality traits of [character] as traits I have.			.75
I recognise myself in [character].			.69
I recognise the strengths of [character] as strengths that I have.			.56
I recognise the reactions to stressful situations of [character] as reactions that I could have.			.51
R^2	.54	.11	.05
Cronbach's α	.94	.89	.89

Note. All factors included $N = 191$, 1 excluded.

Next, the 13 items of parasocial relationships which were Likert-scale based were entered into a confirmatory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation and fixed number of factors set on 2, *KMO* = .95 X^2 (*N* = 192, 78) = 3090.74, *p* < .001. The resultant model explained 82.2% of the variance in 'Parasocial relationship'. Factor loadings of individual items onto the two factors are presented in Table 3 on the next page. The following factors were found.

Trust friendship. The first factor included 11 items about trusting the character such as disclosing a great deal about oneself to the character and sharing one's possessions with the character if they were a real person

Support friendship. The second factor included 2 items about support from the character such as asking them for advice.

Table 3. Factor loadings, explained variance and reliability of the two factors found for the scale 'Parasocial relationship'. (*N* = 192)

	Trust friendship	Support friendship
If [character] was a real person, I could have a warm relationship with her.	.88	
If [character] was a real person, I would give her emotional support.	.86	
If [character] was a real person, she would be able to count on me in times of need.	.85	
If [character] was a real person, I could have disclosed positive things about myself honestly and fully (deeply) to her.	.85	
I think [character] could be a friend of mine.	.83	
If [character] was a real person, I would share my possessions with her.	.83	
If [character] was a real person, I could have disclosed a great deal of things about myself to her.	.83	
If [character] was a real person, I could have disclosed negative things about myself honestly and fully (deeply) to her.	.82	
I want to promote the well-being of [character].	.78	
If [character] was a real person, I could trust her completely.	.76	
If [character] was a real person, I would be able to count on her in times of need.	.76	
Sometimes, I wish I knew what [character] would do in my situation.		.86
Sometimes, I wish I could ask [character] for advice.		.88
R^2	.75	.07
Cronbach's α	.98	.89

Finally, the 12 items of entertainment experience which were Likert-scale based were entered into a confirmatory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation and fixed number of factors set on 2, *KMO* = .94 X^2 (*N* = 192, 66) = 2448.20, *p* < .001. The resultant model explained 78.2% of the variance in 'Entertainment experience'. Factor loadings of individual items onto the two factors are presented in Table 4. The following factors were found.

Meaningful experience. The first factor included 9 items about having a meaningful experience while watching the character, such as being moved by the character and the character leaving one with a lasting impression.

Captivating experience. The second factor included 3 items about experiencing the character as captivating and intriguing, such as being on the edge of one's seat when the character appeared.

Table 4. Factor loadings, explained variance and reliability of the two factors found for the scale 'Entertainment experience'. ($N = 192$)

	Meaningful experience	Captivating experience
It was fun for me to watch [character].	.89	
I had a good time watching [character].	.89	
[Character] was entertaining.	.87	
I found [character] to be very meaningful.	.82	
I was moved by [character].	.78	
[Character] will stick with me for a long time.	.74	
[Character] was thought provoking.	.67	
[Character] left me with a lasting impression.	.65	
I know I will never forget [character].	.61	
When [character] appeared, my heart was pounding.		.89
It was suspenseful when [character] appeared.		.83
I was on the edge of my seat when [character] appeared.		.79
R^2	.69	.09
Cronbach's α	.96	.90

The factors which emerged from the confirmatory factor analysis were recoded into new variables, thereby creating *leadership*, *insecurity*, *unpleasant*, and *affectionate traits* to measure gender traits. The variables *attitudinal*, *situational*, and *personality recognisability* were created to measure recognisability. Furthermore, parasocial relationships was measured with the variables *trust* and *support friendship*, and *meaningful* and *captivating experience* were created to measure entertainment experience.

4. Results

This study aimed to uncover the extent to which engagement with liked and disliked fictional female characters affects the audience's entertainment experience. Several hypotheses were formulated which tested significant differences between liked and disliked female characters in terms of gender traits, recognisability, parasocial relationships, and enjoyment. Other hypotheses tested the potential correlations between the aforementioned concepts.

4.1 ANOVA and t-test for gender traits

A two-way ANOVA was conducted with liked/disliked character groups, and selected character as independent variables and leadership traits as dependent variable. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for liked/disliked character groups on leadership traits, F (1, 117) = 80.88, p < .001, partial η^2 = .41. Also, the selected character revealed a significant main effect on leadership traits, F (1, 117) = 13.25, p < .001, partial η^2 = .10. The test also showed a significant interaction effect between liked/disliked character groups and the selected character, F (1, 117) = 5.55, p = .020, partial η^2 = .045. A t-test showed that liked characters score significantly higher on leadership traits (M = 3.56, SD = .58) than disliked characters (M = 2.48, SD = .88), t(110.42) = 8.07, p < .001 (= H8a).

Because the characters Rhaenyra and Alicent were equally distributed among the liked and disliked groups, a t-test was done to determine whether each of these characters individually show a significant difference in leadership traits when perceived as liked and disliked. A t-test showed that Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen as a liked character scores significantly higher on leadership traits (M = 3.48, SD = .67) than as a disliked character (M = 2.01, SD = .80), t(51) = 7.27, p < .001. Similarly, Alicent Hightower as a liked character scores significantly higher on leadership traits (M = 3.65, SD = .48) than as a disliked character (M = 2.78, SD = .79), t(66) = 5.18, p < .001.

Then, a two-way ANOVA was conducted with liked/disliked character groups, and selected character as independent variables and affectionate traits as dependent variable. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for liked/disliked character groups on affectionate traits, F (1, 117) = 31.79, p < .001, partial η^2 = .21. Also, the selected character revealed a significant main effect on affectionate traits, F (1, 117) = 12.88, p < .001, partial η^2 = .10. No significant interaction effect between liked/disliked character groups and the selected character was shown, F (1, 117) = .10, p = 750, partial η^2 = .00. A t-test showed that liked

characters score significantly higher on affectionate traits ($M = 3.97$, $SD = .73$) than disliked characters ($M = 3.05$, $SD = .96$), t(115.99) = 5.94, $p < .001$ (= H8b).

Next, a two-way ANOVA was conducted with liked/disliked character groups, and selected character as independent variables and unpleasant traits as dependent variable. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for liked/disliked character groups on unpleasant traits, $F(1, 117) = 80.02$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .41$. Also, the selected character revealed a significant main effect on unpleasant traits, $F(1, 117) = 25.19$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$. No significant interaction effect between liked/disliked character groups and the selected character was shown, $F(1, 117) = 1.20$, $p = 275$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. A t-test showed that disliked characters score significantly higher on unpleasant traits ($M = 3.54$, $SD = .73$) than liked characters ($M = 2.41$, $SD = .83$), t(119) = -7.91, $p < .001$ (= H8d).

Finally, a two-way ANOVA was conducted with liked/disliked character groups, and selected character as independent variables and insecurity traits as dependent variable. ANOVA only revealed a significant main effect for selected character on insecurity traits, $F(1, 117) = 26.59$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .19$. No significant interaction effect between liked/disliked character groups and the selected character was shown, $F(1, 117) = .02$, $p = .898$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. A t-test showed no significant difference between liked and disliked characters for insecurity traits, t(119) = -.50, $p = .620$ ($\neq$ H8c).

4.2 ANOVA and t-test for recognisability

A two-way ANOVA was conducted with liked/disliked character groups, and selected character as independent variables and attitudinal recognisability as dependent variable. ANOVA only revealed a significant main effect for liked/disliked character groups on attitudinal recognisability, $F(1, 117) = 192.26$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .62$. No significant interaction effect between liked/disliked character groups and the selected character was shown, $F(1, 117) = .449$, $p = .504$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. A t-test showed that liked female characters score significantly higher on attitudinal recognisability ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.00$) than disliked female characters ($M = 1.98$, $SD = .91$), t(119) = 14.12, $p < .001$ (= H9a).

Next, a two-way ANOVA was conducted with liked/disliked character groups, and selected character as independent variables and situational recognisability as dependent variable. ANOVA only revealed a significant main effect for liked/disliked character groups on situational recognisability, $F(1, 117) = 17.80$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$. No significant interaction effect between liked/disliked character groups and the selected character was shown, $F(1, 117) = .232$, $p = .631$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. A t-test showed that liked female

characters score significantly higher on situational recognisability ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.39$) than disliked female characters ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.09$), t(105.75) = 4.05, $p < .001$ (= H9b).

Then, a two-way ANOVA was conducted with liked/disliked character groups, and selected character as independent variables and personality recognisability as dependent variable. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for liked/disliked character groups on personality recognisability, $F (1, 117) = 73.39$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .39$. Also, the selected character revealed a significant main effect on personality recognisability, $F (1, 117) = 4.00$, $p = .048$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. No significant interaction effect between liked/disliked character groups and the selected character was shown, $F (1, 117) = .434$, $p = .511$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. A t-test showed that liked female characters score significantly higher on personality recognisability ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.09$) than disliked female characters ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.24$), t(119) = 8.46, $p < .001$ (= H9c).

4.3 ANOVA and t-test for parasocial relationships

A two-way ANOVA was conducted with liked/disliked character groups, and selected character as independent variables and trust friendship as dependent variable. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for liked/disliked character groups on trust friendship, $F (1, 117) = 140.26$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .55$. Also, the selected character revealed a significant main effect on trust friendship, $F (1, 117) = 6.73$, $p = .011$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. The test also showed a significant interaction effect between liked/disliked character groups and the selected character, $F (1, 117) = 5.111$, $p = .026$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. A t-test showed that liked female characters score significantly higher on trust friendship ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.24$) than disliked female characters ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.35$), t(119) = 11.54, $p < .001$ (= H10a).

Because of the interaction effect, a t-test was done to determine whether each of these characters individually show a significant difference in trust friendship when perceived as liked and disliked. A t-test showed that Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen as a liked character scores significantly higher on trust friendship ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.38$) than as a disliked character ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.55$), t(51) = 5.48, $p < .001$. Similarly, Alicent Hightower as a liked character scores significantly higher on trust friendship ($M = 5.61$, $SD = .79$) than as a disliked character ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.22$), t(64.88) = 13.36, $p < .001$.

Next, a two-way ANOVA was conducted with liked/disliked character groups, and selected character as independent variables and support friendship as dependent variable. ANOVA only revealed a significant main effect for liked/disliked character groups on support friendship, $F (1, 117) = 42.44$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .27$. No significant interaction effect

between liked/disliked character groups and the selected character was found, $F (1, 117) = 2.87$, $p = .093$, partial $\eta^2 = .024$. A t-test showed that liked female characters score significantly higher on support friendship ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.72$) than disliked female characters ($M = 1.55$, $SD = 1.03$), t(89.49) = 6.46, $p < .001$ (= H10b).

4.4 ANOVA and t-test for entertainment experience

A two-way ANOVA was conducted with liked/disliked character groups, and selected character as independent variables and meaningful experience as dependent variable. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for liked/disliked character groups on meaningful experience, $F (1, 117) = 93.47$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .44$. Also, selected character revealed a significant effect on meaningful experience, $F (1, 117) = 8.25$, $p = .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$. No significant interaction effect between liked/disliked character groups and the selected character was found, $F (1, 117) = .101$, $p = .751$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. A t-test showed that liked female characters score significantly higher on meaningful experience ($M = 4.40$, $SD = .57$) than disliked female characters ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.19$), t(93.04) = 9.55, $p < .001$ (= H1a).

Then, a two-way ANOVA was conducted with liked/disliked character groups, and selected character as independent variables and captivating experience as dependent variable. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for liked/disliked character groups on captivating experience, $F (1, 117) = 38.37$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .25$. Also, selected character revealed a significant effect on captivating experience, $F (1, 117) = 6.11$, $p = .015$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. No significant interaction effect between liked/disliked character groups and the selected character was found, $F (1, 117) = .058$, $p = .809$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. A t-test showed that liked female characters score significantly higher on captivating experience ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.11$) than disliked female characters ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.11$), t(119) = 5.88, $p < .001$ (= H1b).

4.5 Regression analysis with entertainment experience

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with captivating experience as criterion. Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block, attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block, and trust and support friendship were added in the third block. When leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model reached significance, $R^2 = .38$, $F (4, 187) = 28.42$, $p < .001$. Adding situational and personality recognisability in the second model improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .13$, $F (3, 184) = 27.41$, $p < .001$. Then, adding trust friendship in the third model improved the predicted

value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(2, 182) = 22.61$, $p = .037$, with leadership traits, situational recognisability, and trust friendship being significant predictors, while affectionate traits and personality recognisability were no longer significant (see Table 5) (= H2a, H2e, H2g; ≠ H2b, H2c, H2d, H2f, H2h, H2i).

Table 5. Hierarchical regression analysis for captivating experience

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Leadership traits	.48***	.36***	.32***
Insecurity traits	.14*	.11	.08
Unpleasant traits	-.07	.03	.08
Affectionate traits	.19**	.13*	.09
Attitudinal recognisability		.02	-.09
Situational recognisability		.22**	.20**
Personality recognisability		.23*	.19
Trust friendship			.24*
Support friendship			.04
	$R^2 = .38$	$\Delta R^2 = .13$	$\Delta R^2 = .02$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p = .037$

Note. * $p < .050$, ** $p < .010$, *** $p < .001$

When testing the effect on captivating experience for liked female characters, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with captivating experience as criterion. Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block, attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block, and trust and support friendship were added in the third block. When leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model reached significance, $R^2 = .13$, $F(4, 100) = 3.67$, $p = .008$. Adding situational and personality recognisability in the second model improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .15$, $F(3, 97) = 5.32$, $p < .001$. Then, adding trust friendship in the third model improved the predicted value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .05$, $F(2, 95) = 5.12$, $p = .035$, with leadership traits,

situational recognisability, and trust friendship being significant predictors (see Table 6) (=
H3a, H3e, H3g; ≠ H3b, H3c, H3d, H3f, H3h, H3i).

Table 6. Hierarchical regression analysis for captivating experience with liked female
characters

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Leadership traits	.33**	.27**	.22*
Insecurity traits	.08	.06	-.04
Unpleasant traits	-.09	-.10	-.02
Affectionate traits	.08	.07	-.00
Attitudinal recognisability		.02	-.05
Situational recognisability		.31**	.33**
Personality recognisability		.10	.02
Trust friendship			.32*
Support friendship			-.04
	$R^2 = .13$	$\Delta R^2 = .15$	$\Delta R^2 = .05$
	$p = .008$	$p < .001$	$p = .035$

Note. $* p < .050, ** p < .010, *** p < .001$

When testing the effect on captivating experience for disliked female characters, a
hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with captivating experience as criterion.
Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block,
attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block, and
trust and support friendship were added in the third block. When leadership, insecurity,
unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model reached significance, R^2
$= .33$, $F (4, 82) = 10.08$, $p < .001$. Adding situational and personality recognisability in the
second model improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .19$, $F (3, 79) =$
12.22, $p < .001$. However, adding trust and support friendship in the third model did not
significantly improve the predicted value of the model, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F (2, 77) = 10.15$, $p = .153$
(see Table 7) (= H4a, H4e; ≠ H4b, H4c, H4d, H4f, H4g, H4h, H4i).

Table 7. Hierarchical regression analysis for captivating experience with disliked female characters

	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
Leadership traits	.48***	.41***	.38***
Insecurity traits	.25**	.22*	.23*
Unpleasant traits	.09	.21*	.22*
Affectionate traits	.16	.14	.12
Attitudinal recognisability		.02	-.09
Situational recognisability		.10	.04
Personality recognisability		.38**	.39**
Trust friendship			.11
Support friendship			.14
	$R^2 = .33$	$\Delta R^2 = .19$	$\Delta R^2 = .02$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p = .153$

Note. * $p < .050$, ** $p < .010$, *** $p < .001$

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with meaningful experience as criterion. Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block, attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block, and trust and support friendship were added in the third block. When leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model reached significance, $R^2 = .49$, $F (4, 187) = 44.85$, $p < .001$. Adding personality recognisability in the second model improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .11$, $F (3, 184) = 39.05$, $p < .001$. Then, adding trust friendship in the third model significantly improved the predicted value of the model, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F (2, 182) = 34.16$, $p < .001$, with leadership and insecurity traits, and personality recognisability and trust friendship being significant predictors (see Table 8) (= H5a, H5b, H5f, H5g; ≠ H5c, H5d, H5e, H5h, H5i).

Table 8. Hierarchical regression analysis for meaningful experience

	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
Leadership traits	.45***	.30***	.25***
Insecurity traits	.19***	.20***	.16**
Unpleasant traits	-.23***	-.10	-.03
Affectionate traits	.21***	.12*	.07
Attitudinal recognisability		.17	.03
Situational recognisability		.03	.00
Personality recognisability		.27**	.22*
Trust friendship			.32**
Support friendship			.04
	$R^2 = .49$	$\Delta R^2 = .11$	$\Delta R^2 = .03$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p < .001$

Note. * $p < .050$, ** $p < .010$, *** $p < .001$

When testing the effect on meaningful experience for liked female characters, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with meaningful experience as criterion. Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block, attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block, and trust and support friendship were added in the third block. When leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model reached significance, $R^2 = .12$, $F(4, 100) = 3.49$, $p = .010$. Adding attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability in the second model improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .10$, $F(3, 97) = 3.95$, $p = .008$. Then, adding trust friendship in the third model significantly improved the predicted value of the model, $\Delta R^2 = .09$, $F(2, 95) = 4.88$, $p = .002$, with only trust friendship being a significant predictor (see Table 9). Thus, only H6g is accepted and all other hypotheses are rejected.

Table 9. Hierarchical regression analysis for meaningful experience with liked female characters

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Leadership traits	.23*	.14	.06
Insecurity traits	.20	.21*	.09
Unpleasant traits	-.16	-.16	-.07
Affectionate traits	.12	.08	.01
Attitudinal recognisability		.15	.05
Situational recognisability		-.02	-.04
Personality recognisability		.23	.14
Trust friendship			.37**
Support friendship			.07
	$R^2 = .12$	$\Delta R^2 = .10$	$\Delta R^2 = .09$
	$p = .010$	$p = .008$	$p = .002$

Note. $* p < .050$, $** p < .010$, $*** p < .001$

When testing the effect on meaningful experience for disliked female characters, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with meaningful experience as criterion. Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block, attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block, and trust and support friendship were added in the third block. When leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model reached significance, $R^2 = .27$, $F(4, 82) = 7.42$, $p < .001$. Adding personality recognisability in the second model improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .12$, $F(3, 79) = 7.11$, $p = .003$. However, adding trust and support friendship in the third model did not significantly improve the predicted value of the model, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(2, 77) = 6.02$, $p = .180$ (see Table 10) (= H7a, H7e; ≠ H7b, H7b, H7c, H7f, H7g, H7h, H7i).

Table 10. Hierarchical regression analysis for meaningful experience with disliked female characters

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Leadership traits	.41***	.37***	.34**
Insecurity traits	.26*	.21*	.21*
Unpleasant traits	-.07	.03	.05
Affectionate traits	.10	.09	.06
Attitudinal recognisability		-.02	-.13
Situational recognisability		.13	.06
Personality recognisability		.28*	.28*
Trust friendship			.18
Support friendship			.09
	$R^2 = .27$	$\Delta R^2 = .12$	$\Delta R^2 = .03$
	$p < .001$	$p = .003$	$p = .180$

Note. $* p < .050$, $** p < .010$, $*** p < .001$

4.6 Regression analysis with parasocial relationships

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with trust friendship as criterion. Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block and attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block. When leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model reached significance, $R^2 = .59$, $F (4, 187) = 67.04$, $p < .001$. Adding attitudinal and personality recognisability improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .15$, $F (3, 184) = 76.01$, $p < .001$, with attitudinal and personality recognisability being significant predictors and with insecurity traits becoming significant as well (see Table 11). Thus, only H11e is rejected and all other hypotheses are accepted.

Table 11. Hierarchical regression analysis for trust friendship

	Model 1	Model 2
Leadership traits	.34***	.12*
Insecurity traits	.07	.12**
Unpleasant traits	-.38***	-.22***
Affectionate traits	.28***	.17***
Attitudinal recognisability		.38***
Situational recognisability		.05
Personality recognisability		.17*
	$R^2 = .59$	$\Delta R^2 = .15$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$

*Note. * $p < .050$, ** $p < .010$, *** $p < .001$

When testing the effect on trust friendship for liked female characters, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with trust friendship as criterion. Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block and attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block. When leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model reached significance, $R^2 = .30$, $F (4, 100) = 10.89$, $p < .001$. Adding attitudinal and personality recognisability improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .16$, $F (3, 97) = 11.94$, $p < .001$, with attitudinal and personality recognisability being significant predictors (see Table 12). Thus, only H12e is rejected and all other hypotheses are accepted.

Table 12. Hierarchical regression analysis for trust friendship with liked female characters

	Model 1	**Model 2**
Leadership traits	.30**	19*
Insecurity traits	.27**	.30***
Unpleasant traits	-.26**	-.25**
Affectionate traits	.26**	.21**
Attitudinal recognisability		.24*
Situational recognisability		-.01
Personality recognisability		.24*
	$R^2 = .30$	$\Delta R^2 = .16$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$

Note. $* p < .050, ** p < .010, *** p < .001$

When testing the effect on trust friendship for disliked female characters, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with trust friendship as criterion. Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block and attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block. When leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model reached significance, $R^2 = .27$, $F (4, 82) = 7.62$, $p < .001$. Adding attitudinal and situational recognisability improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .23$, $F (3, 79) = 11.46$, $p < .001$, with attitudinal and situational recognisability being significant predictors and with affectionate traits becoming significant as well, while leadership and unpleasant traits were no longer significant (see Table 13) (= H13b, H13c, H13e; ≠ H13a, H13d, H13f, H13g).

Table 13. Hierarchical regression analysis for trust friendship with disliked female characters

	Model 1	**Model 2**
Leadership traits	.27**	.12
Insecurity traits	-.01	.01
Unpleasant traits	-.32**	-.17
Affectionate traits	.19	.19*
Attitudinal recognisability		.34**
Situational recognisability		.25*
Personality recognisability		.06
	$R^2 = .27$	$\Delta R^2 = .23$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$

*Note. * $p < .050$, ** $p < .010$, *** $p < .001$

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with support friendship as criterion. Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block and attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block. When leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model reached significance, $R^2 = .28$, $F (4, 187) = 18.53$, $p < .001$. Adding attitudinal and situational recognisability improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .22$, $F (3, 184) = 26.72$, $p < .001$, with leadership traits, and attitudinal and situational recognisability being significant predictors (see Table 14) (= H14a, H14d, H14e; ≠ H14b, H14c, H14f, H14g).

Table 14. Hierarchical regression analysis for support friendship

	Model 1	**Model 2**
Leadership traits	.42***	.17*
Insecurity traits	-.04	.01
Unpleasant traits	-.12	.03
Affectionate traits	.07	-.03
Attitudinal recognisability		.46***
Situational recognisability		.28***
Personality recognisability		-.04
	$R^2 = .28$	$\Delta R^2 = .22$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$

Note. * $p < .050$, ** $p < .010$, *** $p < .001$

When testing the effect on support friendship for liked female characters, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with support friendship as criterion. Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block and attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block. When leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model did not reach significance, $R^2 = .09$, $F(4, 100) = 2.31$, $p = .063$. Adding situational recognisability improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .19$, $F(3, 97) = 5.21$, $p < .001$, with leadership traits and situational recognisability being significant predictors (see Table 15) (= H15a, H15e; ≠ H15b, H15c, H15d, H15f, H15g).

Table 15. Hierarchical regression analysis for support friendship with liked female characters

	Model 1	**Model 2**
Leadership traits	.31**	.21*
Insecurity traits	.06	.07
Unpleasant traits	.07	.06
Affectionate traits	-.03	-.05
Attitudinal recognisability		.17
Situational recognisability		.34**
Personality recognisability		.00
	$R^2 = .09$	$\Delta R^2 = .19$
	$p = .063$	$p < .001$

*Note. * $p < .050$, ** $p < .010$, *** $p < .001$

When testing the effect on support friendship for disliked female characters, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with support friendship as criterion. Leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were included in the first block and attitudinal, situational, and personality recognisability were added in the second block. When leadership, insecurity, unpleasant, and affectionate traits were used as predictors the model reached significance, $R^2 = .17$, $F(4, 82) = 4.16$, $p = .004$. Adding attitudinal and situational recognisability improved the predictive value of the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .26$, $F(3, 79) = 8.38$, $p < .001$, with attitudinal and situational recognisability being significant predictors, while leadership traits was no longer significant (see Table 16) (= H16c, H16d; ≠ H16a, H16b, H16e, H16f, H16g).

Table 16. Hierarchical regression analysis for support friendship with disliked female characters

	Model 1	**Model 2**
Leadership traits	.34**	.14
Insecurity traits	-.15	-.08
Unpleasant traits	-.08	.08
Affectionate traits	-.05	-.04
Attitudinal recognisability		.54***
Situational recognisability		.24*
Personality recognisability		-.12
	$R^2 = .17$	$\Delta R^2 = .26$
	$p = .004$	$p < .001$

Note. $* p < .050$, $** p < .010$, $*** p < .001$

This study tested a considerable amount of hypotheses. Therefore, Table 17 presents the results for all hypotheses (i.e. rejected or accepted).

Table 17. Hypotheses with results

Hypothesis	Difference/Relationship	Result
H1	Liked female characters score higher on a) meaningful and b) captivating experience than disliked female characters.	a) v, b) v
H2	Captivating experience with female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, g) trust and h) support friendship, and decreases with perceived i) unpleasant traits.	a) v, b) x, c) x, d) x, e) v, f) x, g) v, h) x, i) x
H3	Captivating experience with liked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, g) trust and h) support friendship, and decreases with perceived i) unpleasant traits.	a) v, b) x, c) x, d) x, e) v, f) x, g) v, h) x, i) x
H4	Captivating experience with disliked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, g) trust and h) support friendship, and decreases with perceived i) unpleasant traits.	a) v, b) x, c) x, d) x, e) v, f) x, g) x, h) x, i) x

Table 17. Continued

Hypothesis	Difference/Relationship	Result
H5	Meaningful experience with female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, g) trust and h) support friendship, and decreases with perceived i) unpleasant traits.	a) v, b) v, c) x, d) x, e) x, f) v, g) v, h) x, i) x
H6	Meaningful experience with liked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, g) trust and h) support friendship, and decreases with perceived i) unpleasant traits.	a) x, b) x, c) x, d) x, e) x, f) x g) v, h) x, i) x
H7	Meaningful experience with disliked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) affectionate traits, c) attitudinal recognisability, d) situational recognisability, e) personality recognisability, f) trust and g) support friendship, and decreases with perceived h) insecurity traits, and i) unpleasant traits.	a) v, b) x, c) x, d) x, e) v, f) x, g) x, h) x, i) x
H8	Liked female characters score higher on a) leadership and b) affectionate traits and lower on c) insecurity and d) unpleasant traits than disliked female characters.	a) v, b) v, c) x, d) v
H9	Liked female characters score higher on a) attitudinal recognisability, b) situational recognisability, and c) personality recognisability than disliked female characters.	a) v, b) v, c) v
H10	Liked female characters score higher on a) trust and b) support friendship than disliked female characters.	a) v, b) v
H11	Trust friendship with female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, and decreases with g) perceived unpleasant traits.	a) v, b) v, c) v, d) v, e) x, f) v, g) v
H12	Trust friendship with liked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, and decreases with g) unpleasant traits.	a) v, b) v, c) v, d) v, e) x, f) v, g) v
H13	Trust friendship with disliked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) affectionate traits, c) attitudinal recognisability, d) situational recognisability, e) personality recognisability, and decreases with f) insecurity traits and g) unpleasant traits.	a) x, b) v, c) v, d) x, e) v, f) x, g) x
H14	Support friendship with female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, and decreases with g) unpleasant traits.	a) v, b) x, c) x, d) v, e) v, f) x, g) x

Table 17. Continued

Hypothesis	Difference/Relationship	Result
H15	Support friendship with liked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) insecurity traits, c) affectionate traits, d) attitudinal recognisability, e) situational recognisability, f) personality recognisability, and decreases with g) unpleasant traits.	a) v, b) x, c) x, d) x, e) v, f) x, g) x
H16	Support friendship with disliked female character increases with perceived a) leadership traits, b) affectionate traits, c) attitudinal recognisability, d) situational recognisability, e) personality recognisability, and decreases with f) insecurity traits and g) unpleasant traits	a) x, b) x, c) v, d) v, e) x, f) x, g) x

Note. Rejected = x, accepted = v

5. Discussion

This study explored the female audience's perception of and engagement with fictional female characters from the show House of the Dragon and examined the impact on their enjoyment of these characters, whereby a distinction between liked and disliked female characters was made to test for differing outcomes. Respondents were firstly asked to determine what characteristics fit their female character of choice in order to understand their perception of them. Here, analyses of variances showed that liked female characters score significantly higher on leadership and affectionate traits in comparison to disliked female characters, whereas disliked female characters score higher on unpleasant traits. For instance, Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen and Alicent Hightower both showed higher accredited leadership traits when they were liked by the female audience. This reveals that fictional female characters portrayed with characteristics such as being objective, rational, analytical, as well as being loving, tender, and passionate garner a more positive and favourable impression by the female audience. In line with Ferguson (2012), the portrayal of strong female characters garner positive attitudes as they challenge stereotypes and introduce the female audience to potential role models. Moreover, the stereotypical portrayal of women which often focuses on their beauty and romantic relationships could be dispersed with female characters embodying the aforementioned characteristics, which give them a personal identity and more depth (Ward & Grower, 2020).

As part of examining the engagement between the female audience and the fictional female characters, their sense of familiarity with the characters was tested. Analyses revealed that liked female characters score significantly higher on all levels of recognisability (i.e. attitude, situation, and personality) compared to disliked female characters. Because recognisability moves away from purely demographic resemblances and towards character-specific attributes such as sharing similar opinions, weaknesses, and past experiences (Zerebecki et al., 2022), this suggests the importance of the creation and portrayal of layered female characters, in order for them to be perceived positively by the female viewers. A deeper level of engagement was explored by measuring the presence of parasocial relationships in the context of friendships. Here, the tests revealed that liked female characters score significantly higher on both trust and support friendship than disliked female characters, indicating a higher likeliness of developing deeper relationships and attachments with positively perceived female characters. Interestingly, even though Alicent Hightower was most commonly selected as a disliked character, she showed a higher average for trust friendship as both a liked and disliked character in comparison to Princess Rhaenyra

Targaryen. This could be explained by the character's (inter)actions with other characters and the storylines in the show, however, this was not included in the current study.

With enjoyment playing an important role in this study, the entertainment experience of the female audience was measured to determine a potential distinction between the enjoyment of liked and disliked female characters. Here, analyses revealed that liked female characters score significantly higher on both meaningful and captivating experiences than disliked female characters. This indicates the importance of creating interesting female characters in order for the female audience to enjoy the performance, garner meaningful experiences, and continue an interest into the character, the story, and the overall show.

In order to understand what affects the engagement with and enjoyment of fictional female characters, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to determine the factors that influence parasocial relationships and entertainment experiences of the female audience. The first regression revealed the contributing factors for parasocial relationships, differentiated between trust and support friendship. Here, leadership, insecurity, and affectionate traits, and attitudinal and personality recognisability showed significant positive correlations with trust friendship. In line with H11g, unpleasant traits showed a significant negative influence on trust friendship. These correlations were similar for liked female characters. However, in the context of disliked female characters, only affectionate traits, attitudinal and situational recognisability were identified as positively influencing trust friendship. When testing the predictors for support friendship, perceived leadership traits, attitudinal and situational recognisability showed significant positive correlations in the context of the female characters in general. However, when focussing on liked female characters specifically, only perceived leadership traits and situational recognisability were identified as having a significant positive effect on support friendship. Finally, for disliked female characters the variables attitudinal and situational recognisability were revealed to positively influence support friendship, whereby attitudinal recognisability showed a strong correlation.

In other words, the characteristics portrayed by the female characters from House of the Dragon play an important role in the development and growth of deeper relationships between the female viewer and the fictional female character. Particularly, the perception of a mixture of positive and negative feminine traits (e.g. loving, sensitive, naive), and positive masculine traits (e.g. rational, analytical, practical) within the female character increase the presence of a friendship based on trust and support. In line with Berger and Krahé (2013), Sanders (2010), and Klimmt et al. (2007), the female viewer creates an identity of the

particular female character through the perception of particular attributes, which enables them to see the character as another individual with whom to interact and sympathise. Furthermore, even though this study centres around fictional female characters existing in a fantasy world, the female audience is able to perceive similarities. Interestingly, the female audience particularly recognised resemblances in terms of attitudes (e.g. shared opinions, thought processes) and situations (e.g. similar past experiences), which contribute to parasocial relationships. This supports the notion that viewers who identify with the fictional characters and recognise similar attributes within themselves are more willing to establish a parasocial relationship, as discussed by Lacalle et al. (2021).

Another regression showed perceived leadership traits, situational recognisability, and trust friendship to positively affect the captivating experience of watching fictional female characters. When focussing on liked female characters, similar variables showed significant correlations with captivating experience, whereby situational recognisability and trust friendship increased in effect size. However, for disliked female characters, perceived leadership, insecurity, and unpleasant traits, as well as personality recognisability were revealed to significantly positively influence the captivating experience of the female audience. Contrary to H4h and H4i, insecurity and unpleasant traits showed a weak positive correlation with captivating experience. This supports the notion that unpleasant characters are considered intriguing and interesting to watch as a viewer, as their eccentric behaviours and attributes create a fascination with the portrayed character (Tullman, 2016). In the context of fictional female characters in general, perceived leadership and insecurity traits, personality recognisability, and trust friendship were discovered as positively influencing the meaningful experience of the female audience. However, for liked female characters this significant positive correlation was only discovered with trust friendship. Lastly, the regression revealed perceived leadership and insecurity traits, and personality recognisability as positively influencing the meaningful experience of the female audience in connection to disliked female characters.

As Markovic (2012) and Tullman (2016) argue, both likeable and unlikeable characters could inspire emotions and feelings within the audience while viewing particular fictional characters, which touch on their entertainment experience. This study shows that for disliked characters more negatively perceived characteristics such as arrogance, oversensitivity, and a hunger for power enhance the captivating and meaningful experience of the female viewer, which is in line with Tullmann (2016). Also, a sense of familiarity positively contributes to the viewer's captivating and meaningful experience while watching

disliked female characters, particularly in terms of personality. Here, biographic resonance could play a part as this mostly occurs with characters within an entertainment piece, whereby the viewer is able to recognise similar characteristics in terms of appearance as well as personality (Klimmt and Rieger, 2021). Klimmt and Rieger (2021) furthermore argue that a more intense experience could occur within the viewer when a connection between their individual biography and particular elements of the entertainment piece is perceived. The current study shows support for this argumentation.

Notably, with liked female characters, the presence of a parasocial relationship, particularly trust friendship, is a distinguishing variable that increases the captivating and meaningful experience of the viewer. This could be explained by the fact that such relationships with fictional characters are similar to real-life interpersonal relationships which elicit similar emotional responses (Giles, 2022; Cohen, 2009), therefore contributing to a more intense entertainment experience. Trust friendship emerged as the only significant variable influencing the meaningful experience of the viewer, which shows that a deeper relationship with a liked character attributes to a more meaningful entertainment experience.

Then, taking into account both liked and disliked female characters, the perceived leadership traits variable was identified as positively contributing to the captivating and meaningful experience of the female viewers in both groups. This could indicate that strong female characters who portray characteristics that move away from stereotypical weaker feminine attributes gain a more positive response and entertainment experience within the female audience, which is in line with Ferguson (2012).

These findings suggest that fictional female characters portrayed as strong, complex, yet relatable individuals are important for the female audience's attitude towards female characters and their enjoyment of them. Therefore, writers and producers of fictional stories, particularly intended for television, should create female characters that have layers to them. Instead of constructing female characters characterised by their beauty and (intimate) relationships with others, they should portray a strong personal identity consisting of self-determined ideas, beliefs, and attitudes. Moreover, the addition of traits displaying a sense of leadership and agency as well as vulnerability and particular flaws creates a more interesting character and encourages the female viewer to relate to, identify, and connect with them as real individuals. This could result in the development of deeper relationships with these characters and positively impact their enjoyment of them, as the findings suggest. Notably, writers and producers should understand the importance of the relationships that

female viewers develop with fictional female characters and the significant contribution to their enjoyment of and devotion to the characters, the story, and the show.

This study encountered four main limitations. Firstly, the confirmatory factor analysis for gender traits and recognisability each showed one excluded case for incomplete answers, thereby potentially influencing the sample's representation and the variable outcome. Secondly, the researcher experienced difficulties during the data collection process, which contributed to the relatively small sample size ($N = 192$). The first weeks of data collection showed a low response rate, however, this improved when the researcher regularly posted the survey on the assigned online platforms. However, a significant amount of incomplete responses were recorded which resulted in the reduction of the sample size from $N = 548$ to $N = 192$. These difficulties could be attributed to the specific sample criteria (i.e. female identifying viewers and fans of House of the Dragon who have seen the first season) and the length and duration of the survey. The third limitation pertains to the comparability of the experimental groups. In terms of size, the liked-group contained $n = 105$ participants and the disliked-group contained $n = 87$ participants, which questions the equal distribution and challenges the generalisation of the test outcomes. This could be explained by the notion that the female viewer is more comfortable with answering questions about the female character they like instead of thinking about the character they dislike. Lastly, this study merely focused on the female characters and did not take into account their interactions with other characters and the storylines from the show. These variables could also play a part in the perception and enjoyment of the female characters, however, these were not included in this study which presents an opportunity for future research.

Future research could include the interaction with characters and the storylines within the show in addition to the variables from this research design to test the extent to which these affect the engagement and enjoyment of the female audience. As this study focused on the fantasy-genre, future research could also concentrate on different fictional genres to explore potential differences in the engagement with female characters and the effect on the female audience's enjoyment. Perhaps different genres require female characters to be written differently. Furthermore, data pertaining to the ethnicity and nationality of the participants was collected as part of this study, however, the role of culture was not included in any testing. Therefore, future research could implement a similar experimental research design whereby each group includes female participants from a particular cultural background, to examine the role of culture and ethnicity in the perception, engagement, and enjoyment of fictional female characters.

In conclusion, the findings indicate the importance of creating profound female characters with a strong personal identity in order for the female viewer to engage with and enjoy them more intensely. Here, liked female characters showed higher outcomes in terms of perceived positive masculine and feminine traits, recognisability, parasocial relationships, and enjoyment, whereby the presence of a parasocial trust friendship was the distinguishing positive predictor for both levels of the female audience's entertainment experience. With disliked female characters, negative masculine traits were perceived significantly more and the audience's enjoyment of these characters was positively influenced by the mixture of perceived positive masculine traits and negative masculine and feminine traits, as well as familiarity in terms of personality. As significantly more female-centred stories emerge in television (e.g. Yellowjackets, Dead Ringers, Firefly Lane) and the position of women in society and the female identity continue to evolve, research into the portrayal of women and the impact of entertainment media on the perception of women remains of great importance.

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Appendix A - Questionnaire

Introduction

Welcome to this survey!

Are you also a fan of the HBO original series 'House of the Dragon'? If so, we would love to get your thoughts on the female characters of the show. Do you support someone like Rhaenyra, but despise a character such as Alicent? Or the other way around? With our research we aim to gather insights into your engagement with fictional female characters and your enjoyment of them.

This survey will take approximately 8 minutes. Not too bad right?

Your participation will be completely anonymous and the information gathered during this survey will only be used within the scope of this research and will not be shared publicly. By clicking on 'I consent' below, you understand these terms and you freely consent to participate.

In the case of any questions about the research, you are welcome to send an email to hotdaudienceresearch@gmail.com.

☐ I consent
☐ I do not consent

Do you identify as female?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Respondents will be sent to the end of the survey if 'No' is selected.

Have you watched all episodes from 'House of the Dragon'?

☐ Yes, I have watched all episodes from the first season.
☐ No, I have not watched all episodes from the first season.

Respondents will be sent to the end of the survey if 'No, I have not watched all episodes from the first season' is selected.

The following two questions assign the respondents to their group: liked or disliked female character. The respondents in the 'liked-group' are presented with this question:

Which female 'House of the Dragon' character do you like?

Princess
Rhaenyra Targaryen

Alicent Hightower

Rhaenys Targaryen

Rhaena Targaryen

Lady Laena Valeryon

Helaena Targaryen

Baela Targaryen

Mysaria

☐ Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen

☐ Alicent Hightower

☐ Princess Rhaenys Targaryen

☐ Lady Laena Velayron

☐ Helaena Targaryen

☐ Baela Targaryen

☐ Rhaena Targaryen

☐ Mysaria

The respondents in the 'disliked-group' are presented with this question:

Which female 'House of the Dragon' character do you dislike?

Princess
Rhaenyra Targaryen
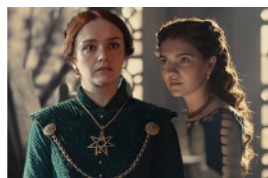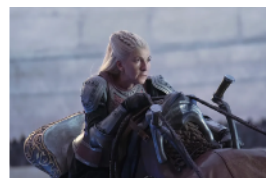
Alicent Hightower

Rhaenys Targaryen

Rhaena Targaryen

Lady Laena Valeryon

Helaena Targaryen

Baela Targaryen

Mysaria

☐ Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen

☐ Alicent Hightower

☐ Princess Rhaenys Targaryen

☐ Lady Laena Velayron

☐ Helaena Targaryen

☐ Baela Targaryen

☐ Rhaena Targaryen

☐ Mysaria

After the respondents have selected a female character, both groups answer the following questions.

How would you characterise [character]? Please indicate for each of the following characteristics whether they apply to this character.

	Totally uncharacteristic	Somewhat uncharacteristic	Neither characteristic nor uncharacteristic	Somewhat characteristic	Totally characteristic
Analytical	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Logical	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Objective	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Practical	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Rational	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Solution-focused	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Arrogant	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Boastful	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Harsh	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inconsiderate	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Loud	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Power-hungry	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Emotional	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Empathic	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Loving	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Passionate	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sensitive	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tender	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Anxious	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Disoriented	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Naive	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Overcautious	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Oversensitive	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Self-doubting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

To what extent do you recognise similarities between you and [character]? Please indicate the extent of your agreement or disagreement with the statements below.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I recognise the personality traits of [character] as traits that I have.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise the weaknesses of [character] as weaknesses that I have.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise myself in [character].	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise the strengths of [character] as strengths that I have.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise the behaviours of [character] as	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

behaviours that I could show.							
I recognise the situations that [character] encounters as situations that could also happen to me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise the past experiences of [character] as similar to my past experiences.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise the problems that [character] has as the problems that I could have.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise the places, in which I see [character] as the places I could be in.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise my life in the life of [character].	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise the topics that [character] discusses with others as the topics I could discuss with other people in my life.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I recognise the life changes [character] experiences as life changes that could happen to me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise [character]'s approach to life as an approach to life that I have.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise [character]'s opinions about what is good and bad as opinions I have.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise the solutions to problems of [character] as solutions I could follow.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise [character]'s opinions about other people as opinions I have.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise the thought processes before decisions of [character] as thought processes I have.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I recognise [character]'s opinions about social problems as opinions I have.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise the decisions of [character] as decisions that I could make.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I recognise the reactions to stressful situations of [character] as reactions that I could have.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How would you describe your relationship with [character]? Please indicate the extent of your agreement or disagreement with the statements below.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
If [character] was a real person, I could have disclosed negative things about myself honestly and fully (deeply) to her.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If [character] was a real person, I could have disclosed a great deal of things about myself to her.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Sometimes, I wish I knew what [character] would do in my situation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If [character] was a real person, I could have disclosed positive things about myself honestly and fully (deeply) to her.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sometimes, I wish I could ask [character] for advice.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I think [character] could be a friend of mine.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If [character] was a real person, I would be able to count on her in times of need.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If [character] was a real person, I would give her emotional support.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If [character] was a real person, she would be able to count on me in times of need.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

If [character] was a real person, I would share my possessions with her.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If [character] was a real person, I could trust her completely.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If [character] was a real person, I could have a warm relationship with her.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I want to promote the well-being of [character].	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

To what extent do you enjoy [character]? Please indicate the extent of your agreement or disagreement with the statements below.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
It was fun for me to watch [character].	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I had a good time watching [character].	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
[Character] was entertaining.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I found [character] to be very meaningful.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was moved by [character].	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
[Character] was thought provoking.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
[Character] will stick with me for a long time.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I know I will never forget [character].	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
[Character] left me with a lasting impression.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was at the edge of my seat when [character] appeared.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When [character] appeared, my heart was pounding.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It was suspenseful when [character] appeared.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Introduction to demographics

Keep going, you are almost there! We would like you to answer some questions regarding personal background information before completing this questionnaire.

What is your age? (in number)

What is your ethnicity?

☐ White (e.g. German, Irish, English, Italian, Polish, French, etc)

☐ Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin (e.g. Mexican or Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, etc)

☐ Black or African American (e.g. African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somalian, etc)

☐ Asian (e.g. Chinese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, etc)

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native (e.g. Navajo nation, Blackfeet tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village or Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc)

☐ Middle Eastern or North African (e.g. Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Syrian, Moroccan, Algerian, etc)

☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (e.g. Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Chamorro, Tongan, Fijian, etc)

☐ Some other race, ethnicity or origin

What is your country of origin?

Respondents are presented with a list consisting of 195 countries to select from.

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

☐ Less than highschool

☐ Highschool diploma

☐ Bachelor's degree

☐ Graduate or professional degree (MA, MS, MBA, PhD, JD, MD, DDS, etc.)

Finally, have you watched all episodes of 'Game of Thrones'?

☐ Yes, I have watched all episodes from all 8 seasons.

☐ No, I started watching the show, but I did not finish it.

☐ No, because I am watching it currently for the first time.

☐ No, I have never watched an episode from this show.

End of survey

Thank you very much for your participation! Your answers have been saved.