

“SERIES CULTURE” AND FANDOM IN GAME OF THRONES: CHECK-IN AS AN IDENTITY MARKER IN BRAZIL AND PORTUGAL

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Abstract

In times of technological change, television and social media are increasingly intertwined. Watching a serial fiction, for example, is no longer a solitary task and, from the popularity of this format, this research conducted content analysis of the comments regarding the fifth season of *Game of Thrones* on *Facebook* and *Twitter* in Brazil and in Portugal. From the collected data, the act of check-in in the episodes was symptomatic for questions of belonging, affection and pleasure. Therefore, the existence of an emotional connection between the fandom, beyond the perception of the series as part of the self, was observed, shaping relations and behaviours.

Keywords: Series culture; fandom; identity; Game of Thrones; check-in; Brazil; Portugal.

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Introduction

In changing times, contemporary communication presumes a bigger symmetry between transmitters and receivers, now in a constant exchange of roles. Television and social media are increasingly intertwined, bringing new technologies to old habits now leveraged by online sharing, generating a real-time backchannel of millions of organic comments (Proulx, Shepatin, 2012). A ubiquitous high-speed connection, with more accessible prices, also allowed the most diverse contents to circulate without geographic, legal and market impositions, guaranteeing the popularisation of TV series worldwide and highlighting the format as one of the ones that receives the majority of investments by the producers.

Such a context may justify the popularity of the *Game of Thrones* (*GOT*) series created by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss for HBO. Based on the books of George R. R. Martin's *The Song of Ice and Fire*, the narrative followed the multiple stories which took place in the seven kingdoms of Westeros, where summers lasted for decades and winters for a lifetime. *GOT* won the most viewed episode of the year in the United States during its last cycle, in 2019, with 19.3 million viewers via broadcasting and online platforms.¹ It is still the television production with the most Emmys with 38 trophies, including best drama² for two consecutive years.³

Game of Thrones' popularity, coupled with the cultural and technological factors that precede it, is symptomatic for understanding the development of the so-called “series culture” (Silva, 2014a; 2014b), which has in the fans one of its biggest catalysts. Through different levels of engagement, fandom constructs critical and interpretive practices, cultural

productions, and the formation of an alternative social community through active consumption (Jenkins, 2007, 2015; Fiske, 1992).

Based on this context, this research aims to study the “series culture”, from the *GOT* fandom. In order to fulfill this proposition, a content analysis (Bardin, 2009) of the tweets and the *Facebook* comments published about the series during the year 2015, in Brazil and in Portugal, was conducted. From the collected data, approximately 11,500 publications and six categories emerged, and the check-in in the episodes - verified in 17% of the occurrences - was symptomatic to investigate issues of belonging, affectivity and pleasure in the fandom of the series (Sandvoss, 2005).

The “series culture” and the fandom

Serial fiction can be defined by the set of syntagmatic sequences based on unequal alternation. According to Lorenzo Vilches (1984), each episode reproduces a set of already known elements, which are part of the repertory of the receiver, being enriched in each chapter with new data and information. Cassio Starling Carlos (2006) believes that they are the most faithful mirror of society in mass culture because of its diversity of themes, textual quality, relevance to relevant subjects and unpredictability.

Analysing what would be a series production of quality, however, can be a complex task. Melanie Bourdaa (2011) lists some points that defined this category. For the author, an ambition for innovative aesthetics, a redefinition of narrative genres, and a creation of complex mythologies are qualitative indicators in a series. This question still has to be analysed by

1 Retrieved on June 10, 2019, from <https://www.correiodopovo.com.br/artegenda/final-de-game-of-thrones-se-torna-epis%C3%B3dio-com-maior-audi%C3%A2ncia-da-hbo-1.340246>.

2 Retrieved on June 21, 2017, from <http://g1.globo.com/pop-arte/noticia/2016/09/emmy-awards-2016-game-thrones-quebra-recorde-de-premios.html>.

3 Won in 2016 and 2017.

the construction that the term carries, since watching certain TV series has become a sign of good taste and distinction among the members of a cultural elite. When some productions have a level of "high culture", justifying the intellectual and emotional engagement with the content, Lúcia Coutinho (2016) ponders about the subjectivity that the term carries, as a great parcel of dramas can be taken as complex focuses on white and heterosexual men and narratives that appeal to more masculine genres. Nevertheless, even if the concept of quality is subject to discussion and leads to socio cultural prejudices, the popularity of the series in the contemporaneity is undeniable, generating what Marcel Silva (2014a, 2014b, online) calls the "series culture".

The author believes in three central conditions which occurred more than three decades ago to justify the prominent position of the format, inside and outside the traditional models of television. The first involves narrative forms, through complexity as a widely used feature, and having a close connection with the development, and the placement, of original series on cable TV. This is the case for *HBO* which, since the 1990s, has launched a policy of producing its own content and has offered to recognise producers and creators - most with a curriculum built on the cinema - large budgets to produce series with shorter seasons and unusual thematics, accelerating the process of diversification and qualification.

The second condition relates to the technological context. In this environment, Silva (2014a, 2014b, online) seeks to respond to the way in which the current forms of digital consumption have created conjunctures for the formation of a new diachronic and transnational telephilia. In addition to an interest of viewers in watching series through the internet, and the vast amount of extra content provided by the broadcasters generated for sharing, the author ponders that access does not occur only when the programmes are on the air, covering the old videos and the memory of the stations.

In a diachronic way, the digitalisation of the series would demonstrate the cultural circuit in which the programmes are immersed, remaining alive, even before the end that characterises the traditional televisual flow. For the author, a true telephilia, is only possible diachronically, since it requires memory and continuous access to draw a history of genres and formats, as well as conformations and overlaps. "And it is in the digital universe, inside and outside the network, that the foundations of this hyperconnected spectatoriality typical of a "series culture", which we can call cybertelefilia" (Silva, 2014a, p. 247) are found.

Finally, the third condition concerns consumption in terms of "whether in the spectatorial dimension of the public, through fan communities and strategies of engagement, or in the creation of news and critical spaces, linked or not to official communication vehicles" (Silva, 2014a, p. 243). The ability to attract audiences occurs not only by technical investment but mainly thanks to the text (Colonna, 2010), being able to capture the attention of the audience in a dispersive and cacophonous environment, although always exhibiting the same structure as if it were new. The public is the vertex of a new conceptual scheme of exchanges between fans and broadcasters. "It is, in fact, a very complex communication process that brings out the dialectical and interrelated way in which the relations between the mass media and its public are formed" (Silva, 2014a, p. 248).

In this scenario, the active participation of the public was potentialised from the change of the isolation of the broadcasting model to the group activity (Jenkins, 2015). The fandom becomes a subversive construction made between the various interactions between producers and media consumers (Sandvoss, 2005) and, in it, we can find more or less common behaviours, but there is no homogeneity, since the re-signification is always linked to the experiences and emotionality. The fans, immersed in the participatory culture, have different

emotional and financial investments, allowing a classification on three different levels (Vilela, 2017).

On the first level, the most basic, are those who watch their favourite series, without commenting on them in social media. This does not mean that such individuals do not have *Twitter* or *Facebook* accounts, just that they do not use them for the purpose of discussing, or externalising that they are fans of a certain programme. They are the fan-consumers, who do not nourish ties to fandom.

Being a fan-consumer does not, however, prevent active consumption, since the re-signification also occurs at internal levels. The very conceptualisation proposed by Jenkins (2006, 2009, 2015), which has free inspiration in the work of Michel de Certeau (1994) in what the author calls “poaching”, shows daily reinterpretation of forms that allow an escape from the power of the media. Reinterpretation is reflected in cultural status as an improper and cultural identity, based on engagement (Hills, 2002). Such concepts are also present in Lawrence Grossberg’s (1992) text when he states that the difference between consumers and fans, and the fans themselves, is the energy and level of affectivity devoted to production.

The level of engagement also defines the difference between a fan-consumer and those who not only watch a series, but use social media to comment and discuss. This is the fan-connected (Vilela, 2017). Individuals who make a bigger emotional investment, mainly do so for reasons of socialisation and fun. They become more active participants in the process of transformation of media culture (Jenkins, 2006).

The affectivity, in this context, is relevant at the moment in which the relation of the fan with the culture happens, producing pleasure. Affect works in two distinct but complementary ways, a quantitative and a qualitative one, determining the amount of energy that the person provides, as well as the quality of it. In this way, in addition to distinguishing a

fan-consumer from a fan-connected, a social organisation in fandom is created, through hierarchies, because the higher the emotional investment, the greater the differentiation and legitimacy.

[...] affection is “soul-disposition, feeling,” “friendship, sympathy, passion.” The affective investment linked to appropriations and negotiations with the sonorities is a central point for the understanding of the massive musical genres. [...] The body and the mediation it performs are the places par excellence of feeling (Janotti Jr, 2004, p.197).

With the highest levels of affection and engagement, there is the fan-expert (Vilela, 2017) who collects expensive items, watches the same episode several times and is very active, not only on social media, but in specialised forums and websites. They are avid collectors and “the cultural collection is a point where economic and cultural capitals converge” (Fiske, 1992, p. 43). They are seen by Fiske (1992) as those who accumulate more knowledge and prestige within the fandom, acting as opinion leaders and holding some power before the others. In *Game of Thrones*, those who have read the books can be considered fan-experts for performing an analysis of each episode in terms of the fidelity between the two formats.

Engagement and affection also appear in cultural production, a more intense mode of appropriation, in the way fans gather to subtitle episodes and make them available on the network, as well as creating new stories and illustrations from the original content (Jenkins, 2015). It must be recognised, however, that such attitudes are transgressions of copyright laws, even though they serve as free publicity for broadcasters, endorsing the logic of cultural industries. Nevertheless, sociability and social consumption - involving the building of ties, collaborative work and collective intelligence, which Pierre Lévy (1999) has already dealt with - clearly differentiate the audience of an audiovisual production. Group constructions are ultimately the most interesting aspects of this culture.

Methodology

Laurence Bardin (2009) defines content analysis as a set of research techniques that is intended to interpret communications. Its object is the word, with regard to the individual and current aspect of language. It works with communications, and it is categorial-thematic, aiming at a manipulation of the messages - content and expression - to find the indicators that make it possible to infer another reality than that offered by the messages. The author organises it into three main moments, the pre-analysis; the exploitation of the material; and the treatment of results, inference, and interpretation.

The pre-analysis is the moment of organisation of the material that will constitute the corpus of the investigation. It aims to operationalise and systematise the initial ideas and lead to a precise scheme. In order to better understand the points of contact between the "series culture" and the practices of the fans, the corpus of the research was traced in two different ways, one for *Twitter* and another for *Facebook*, through the same object, the first and then the tenth episode of the fifth season of *Game of Thrones* released in 2015. The search in the microblog was made using the hashtags "#domingot" "#GOT" and "#GameOfThrones" and limited places of publication in Brazil and Portugal in the interval of 24 hours from the beginning of the episode. On *Facebook*, as it is impractical to carry out research by themes or keywords, an analysis of the comments was conducted in the posts made on the *HBO Game of Thrones BR* and *SYFY pages (Portugal)*.⁴

At this stage, a floating reading in the 3,049 comments on *Facebook* and in the 8,419 on *Twitter* was performed. Of that total, 3,020 and 8,309, respectively, occurred on Brazilian soil while 29 and 110 were on Portuguese soil, corresponding to the percentages of 26.33% and 72.45% in Brazil, and 0.17% and 1.05%, in Portugal. In the constitution of the corpus, the investigation established what would be investigated

through the rules of completeness, representativeness and homogeneity.

During the exploration of the material, six groups were identified and were distinguished among themselves by the semantic and contextual approximation. The check-in category, the subject of this article, involved affirmations about watching the series, as well as the questions that involved the unknown about which episode was being transmitted, or about the existence of sites that were transmitted via streaming. It presented, therefore, 1,437 occurrences on social media analysed in Brazil and 29 in Portugal. These values correspond, respectively, to the percentages of 12.73% and 20.86%, compared to the 11,468 posts collected, cataloged and analysed.

Check-in as a cultural, identity and technological marker

With a large number of characters, more than fifty if calculated since the first season, and various plots and arcs, *GOT* stood out for its fan engagement on social media. The development of multiple points-of-view stimulated network participation, as the higher the number of storylines, the greater the chance of increasing viewer interest.

In this scenario, the time investment says a lot about the profile of each fan. While some concentrated on the narrative, others limited themselves to check-in in the episodes, giving notoriety only to the act of watching *Game of Thrones*. It is not possible, however, to assert that these individuals were not criticising or even expressing some expertise on the series in another *tweet* or comment, after all, content analysis also revealed the categories "criticism", "affection", "expertise", "institutional" and "appropriation". Nevertheless, it is necessary to discuss and analyse such a posture that demonstrates a level of intermediate engagement between the fan-consumer and the fan-expert.

4 In Portugal, the series is shown on SYFY, a cable channel, with no official page dedicated only to the show.

Even though the posture of these individuals does not include much textual information, limited to information about accessing and watching episodes as shown in Figure 1, such comments can be perceived as nutrients to a relationship with the fandom (Jenkins, 2015). Although they show little network activity if analysed in isolation, they are symptomatic for understanding the social bond between the fan and the series, and among the fans themselves, ultimately working to identify the group as a community of interest in *Game of Thrones* (Sandvoss, 2005). Using check-in not only identifies who follows the narrative, but allows socialisation through points of contact between the individual and the collective.



Figure 1:
Tweets in the tenth episode
of the fifth season of *GOT*, in Portugal.
Source:
twitter.com

In addition to cohesion with the collectivity, this identification promoted the content on social media ensuring the presence of the series on *trending topics*, a space that accounts for the number of times the same set of words appears in publications. It works as a free publicity space - in personal and individual spaces - by fostering social bond (Hills, 2002) through feelings and the configuration of the senses, present in the affective investments of fandom.

Through the check-in, analysed from the point of view of the “series culture” (Silva, 2014a; 2014b, online), the technological condition appears in different but complementary forms. While the possibilities offered by digital technologies allow visibility via social media to accompany a serial narrative, the creation of a stream of personalised programming loses

force when the fans wish to follow the series according to the broadcasting schedule to simultaneously immerse themselves in a sea of live comments about the subject. It is perceived that this opportunity for network socialisation is now indispensable to broadcasting, at a time when its greatest appeal is to build a joint activity creating connections through common tastes. Social appeal at this time, driven by digital technology, is more relevant to fans than the personalisation provided by binary language. Figure 2 reveals that the interest in the group, and to congregate with the fandom, was such that some justified their reasons for not participating in a synchronous way to the transmission of the series. There was some fear of losing touch with others.

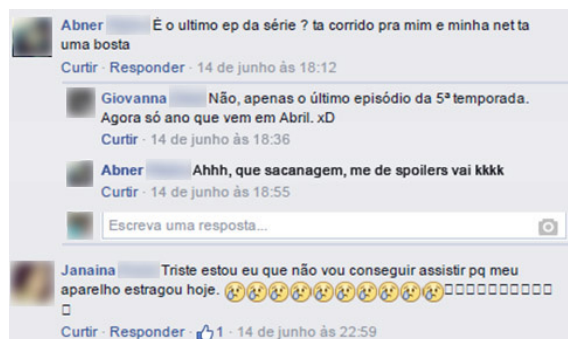


Figure 2:
Comments on the tenth episode of the fifth season
of *GOT*, in Brazil.
Source:
facebook.com/GameofThronesBR

This behaviour denotes that the *cybertelevision* present in the culture of the series (Silva, 2014a, 2014b, online) happens not only among those who actually watched the episodes. It is also present among those who could not follow the narrative via broadcasting. While discussing their unavailability, they reinforce the understanding that they are also responsible for the engagement and that it produces pleasure, since there was lamentation about the inability to watch *GOT*. In other words, the check-in category in this research – and in

the social accounting on the internet itself – is made up of comments from people who were not actually watching the content, even though they wanted to.

The lamentation over the impossibility of watching content still ratifies the understanding that the success of a series is directly linked to the ability to attract audiences through more intricate (Silva, 2014a, 2014b, online) and complex texts (Colonna, 2010), although this complexity refers to a masculinised narrative with low representation of black and LGBTQ+ characters. The act of expressing what you are watching – and doing it in such a showy way – reinforces the idea of belonging to a “cultural elite” (Coutinho, 2016), since social media serve as an element of identity. In other words, we share what we want others to see and think about us. There is a process of curation about what is public – and desirable to be seen – and what is private and therefore concealable. In expressing their predilection for *Game of Thrones*, fans have used *GOT*'s complex narrative form and refined aesthetics – one of the conditions to justify the prominence given to television series – as cultural and social status, in and out of fandom.

There is then a nurtured social bond not only among the members of the fandom, but among the members of a small “cultural elite” that consumes popular products. This belonging strengthens the lack of further discussion on the cultural construction of the quality of the series, as well as on the identification with its narrative.

Notwithstanding, check-in was also used on *Facebook* to warn friends about the new chapters, encouraging them to watch the series, as shown in Figure 3. Not only is there, in these cases, a direct warning that reveals that the individual is watching the show, but an indication for another fan to do so, which can generate conversation between both. Social media function as news and critical spaces, not linked to official communication vehicles, although they are essential for the promotion of the series.



Figure 3:

Comments on the fifth episode of the fifth season of *GOT*, in Brazil.

Source:

[facebook.com/GameofThronesBR](https://www.facebook.com/GameofThronesBR)

In addition to the justifications for not watching the episodes, some of the fans discussed their need to do their jobs even though they wanted to watch the episodes with the other fans, as shown in Figure 4. These users sought not only an incentive to drop their duties, but the ratification of belonging to a fandom. An investment was noticed, in fans-connected (Vilela, 2017), aiming at socialisation and fun through *Game of Thrones*.

Such behaviour around the series relates check-in to the etymology of the word “fan”, which refers to dedication to some mystical or mythological figure in a temple-like space (Janotti Jr, 2004). As much as studies of fandoms have moved away from this feature, it can be found on both *Facebook* and *Twitter* by showing a fondness for the *GOT* narrative over other tasks.



Figure 4:

Tweet in the tenth episode of the fifth season of *GOT*, in Portugal.

Source:

twitter.com/

As a cable television, which requires payment to allow access to its programs, some of the comments on *Facebook* and *Twitter* contained inquiries about which pages would make the series available for free streaming or download, as Figure 5 depicts. Such behaviour was found even on the official page of the show, revealing that fandom activities do not always comply with current legislation and copyright (Jenkins, 2015).



Figure 5:

Comments on the tenth episode of the fifth season of *GOT*, in Brazil.

Source:

[facebook.com/GameofThronesBR](https://www.facebook.com/GameofThronesBR)

They also reinforce the subversive character of early fan studies, which have been discarded in more recent ones with a synchronised view of the cultural industry. Thus, they show that fandom activity uses check-in as an essential activity for group cohesion and for ratifying identity as a fan and as a cultural consumer. In this sense, the laws that protect the creators are put in the background, given the need for self-affirmation as a subject before the collective, via social media on the internet.

Regarding the activities of subtitles, downloads and illegal streaming, there is no recognition of intellectual property rights, ratifying the notion of poaching (De Certeau, 1994) in which the actions of fandom, although they may promote the series free, strengthen social, cultural and identity ties; it is still regarded as indomitable and unpredictable behaviour.

Final considerations

Despite appearing as a threat to the leading role of television content, social media have become major allies of broadcasters in order to retain audience and publicise programmes. The proof of this is the development of a “series culture” (Silva, 2014a, 2014b, online) fueled by more complex narratives and more participatory technology.

From the digitalisation of the content, cybertelefilia and participation consecrate the “series culture” as a result of cultural and technological vectors, being established in a cultural scenario of convergent digital media, with peculiar dynamics of production, circulation and consumption. In this context, the interaction of the audience becomes essential, not only for the connected televisions, but also for the propagation of television texts in social media.

The fan becomes a central element in this new media configuration, expressing itself more effectively through social media. Serial productions rely on fandom to debate, disclose and share their narratives, even if they are subject to criticism, negative comments and failure regarding propagability. No one is safe. And more than that, no one wants to be safe. Nobody wants to stay out of the discussion.

In this discussion via *Facebook* and *Twitter*, check-in was symptomatic. Not only has it expressed - even implicitly - emotive reactions that are responsible for moving the participatory culture (Jenkins, 2015; 2015) but it has also identified the person as part of the fandom. And this identification turns out to be important for the construction of identity. Although there is a distance between the fan and his object of worship, there is, from the analytical point of view, an intense emotional connection between both, as well as the perception of the external object as part of the self. The consumption of series is a constituent part of the identification of the subjects and, therefore, shapes their relationships before the others.

Therefore, the idea of the fan condition as an extension of itself is developed, and the object of admiration becomes an integral part of the "I" and not just a text with which it relates. There is, thus, a difficulty in identifying dominant and dominated, due to conflicts of interests in the field of production and reception.

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