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Full Length Research Paper

Desensitization of the Lebanese audience to the portrayal of violence on *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*: A case study

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This research investigated the desensitization signs shown by the Lebanese audience to the violence portrayed on *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*. The research's study was a qualitative case study of the theory of desensitization applied on two Lebanese participants, each watching respectively the series *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*. The participants were chosen based on the fact that one had never watched *Breaking Bad* and the second had never watched *Game of Thrones*. The participants were interviewed pre-series, and then throughout the exposure to several episodes. The descriptive experiment led to the results that after repeated exposure to *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*, the Lebanese viewer, even if already tolerant to on-screen violence, showed desensitization signs to the violence, drugs, incest and rape portrayed on-screen in the two series.

Key words: Television series, desensitization, Lebanese audience.

INTRODUCTION

Television is one of the most widespread communication media. By 2018, more than 1.4 billion households reported owning at least one TV set, representing 79% of the total households; all households in the developed world now own a TV set while 69% own at least one set in developing countries. Today, television series are dominating the entertainment world. This called for questioning the effects that the high level of exposure might have on the viewer. In fact, numerous studies were conducted on the different psychological effects that television series have on the audience. In the years 2008 and 2011, two of the most prominent American television series aired in the United States of America is *Breaking*

Bad and *Game of Thrones*. Given the fact that the shows are recognized worldwide today and have had an influence on the American culture in various ways, they were chosen for this research in order to shed light on their psychological effects on a Lebanese audience, therefore adding to the already existing scholarly literature on the subject.

This research revolved around the psychological theory of desensitization. Desensitization is a psychological process that has often been involved in explaining viewers' emotional reactions to media violence. Research on emotional reactions to violent messages has been concerned with the possibility that repeated exposure to

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violence in the mass media would result in desensitization, that is, that exposure to media violence would undermine feelings of concern, empathy, or sympathy that viewers might have toward the victims. To understand the effects of repeated exposure to violence, researchers have suggested that viewers become comfortable with violence that is initially anxiety provoking, much as they would if they were undergoing exposure therapy. The desensitization theory is defined by the following themes: The nature of the perpetrator (Bandura, 1986), the justification of violence (Jo and Berkowitz, 1994), the level of exposure to violence, the psychological shift from aversion to arousal (Linz et al., 1988), the decrease of emotional responsivity (Smith and Donnerstein, 1998), and the aggressive thoughts (Jo and Berkowitz, 1994).

In order to study the Lebanese audience watching *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*, the following research question was raised: After repeated exposure to *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*, does the Lebanese viewer experience signs of desensitization to the violence portrayed on-screen? It is very important to note that this case study did not aim at generalizing its findings onto the Lebanese population as a whole, given the small sample size. Rather, the research aimed observing the subjects' reactions to violence, then matching potential signs of desensitization to the reactions of the participants watching the series, in order to determine whether the Lebanese population was affected by repeated exposure to violence, and whether participants became comfortable with initially anxiety-provoking situations.

METHODS

The research question was based on the theory of desensitization. Violence in this research is defined as physical harm, rape, incest and drugs. The themes used to develop the research question were the following: The justification of the violence portrayed on-screen, the level of exposure to media violence, going from the aversion to the enjoyment of the violence on-screen, the decrease of emotional responsivity after several exposure to violence on-screen, and the aggressive thoughts that stem from being exposed to violent scenes.

The research question is descriptive, and the research methodology that was applied is a qualitative case study research method. In general, a qualitative research explores more in depth situations, and generates detailed data in order to understand the context. It establishes an understanding and description of people's personal experiences in the subject discussed. In this case, it was a matter of describing the attitude of the viewer before and after being exposed to violence of many forms and lack of morals. It was not about generalizing the results on the Lebanese population, but rather describing the effects of repeated exposure to media violence on two Lebanese participants.

The participants' requirement remained in the fact that the participant had to not have watched the series previously, in order for the researcher to describe the participants' reactions to the desensitization themes pre-series, and then observe their evolution while the participant was being repeatedly exposed to the series.

Two Lebanese participants were chosen. One of them had never

watched *Breaking Bad*, the other one had never watched *Game of Thrones*. Both participants were Lebanese, respectively 27 and 25 years old. They both acquired a university-level degree, and both work in the private sector. The original component of the research remains studying the Lebanese population, and adding scholarly literature about the region to the subject.

The choice of only one participant per series was because the study was going to be an in-depth description of the evolution of their reactions after repeated exposure: The researcher observed the participant's reactions to almost every episode of each series. For lack of experimental laboratories in Lebanon for such research, which did not allow the presence of multiple participants in the same controlled room watching the episodes at the same time, the researcher had to settle on two participants and follow their exposure schedule independently.

Each participant was separately asked a set of pre-series questions. The participant who signed up to watch *Breaking Bad* was asked about their view on drug use and drug dealing because this is the main subject of the show. The participant who signed up to watch *Game of Thrones* was asked about their view on power and torture, which are recurring themes in the series.

Afterwards, the participants were asked to watch the series up to specific episodes, after which there was an interview, with questions revolving around the desensitization themes that will either confirm or refute the observation of desensitization after the exposure. The data generated from the interviews described the reactions of the participants after repeated exposure to violent scenes, torture, gore, and drug dealing. This description was matched to the short-term effects of the theory of desensitization, which gave a descriptive look at whether the signs shown by participants match the signs of desensitization.

RESULTS

Nature of the perpetrator

In *Breaking Bad*, the main character is Walter White, a chemistry school teacher diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Throughout the series, the character develops into a violent drug dealer who blurs the line between right and wrong. At the beginning of the first season, the participant defined the perpetrator as "a loser", and added that she felt "pity for him". When asked about his character's attributes: Smart, successful, attractive, funny, respected, popular and violent, the participant answered "no" to all and described him as "colorless, odorless, and tasteless". At some point at the end of the first season, the perpetrator changed his appearance by shaving his head, and then committed his first act of violence by exploding the office of a drug dealer, the participant's view of the perpetrator changed. In her opinion, he was now "smart", "attractive", "respected", "feared" and "violent", and she started "rooting for this Walt". Throughout the seasons, the participant rooted for Walt who developed into a drug dealer, tried to evade the authorities and gained control in his household. At the end of the last season, the perpetrator was at the head of a drug empire, and the participant shared: "I can't see him as a criminal, maybe he is. But I see him as a businessman".

Regarding *Game of Thrones*, before starting the series, the participant mentioned that "if the main character is

appealing, he becomes the full focus of the series". One character liked by the participants is Daenerys Targaryen, who is fair, but violent. The participants defined Daenerys Targaryen as "smart", "attractive", "respected", "successful", "popular" and "violent only when needed".

Justification of violence, lack of morals, drug use and drug deals

In *Breaking Bad*, the main character Walter White, the perpetrator, commits a series of violent acts, including murders, cooking methamphetamine, and creating a drug dealing empire. Throughout the seasons, the participant justified Walter White actions on many accounts. In the first season, Walter White was thinking about committing his first murder. The participant view on the matter was: "It's a necessity to kill Kraze8". The participants also shared: "I empathize with Walt because he is doing it for his family" and considered that: "anything he needs to do to get away I would accept". After the perpetrator committed his first murder, the participant's reaction was as follows: "I was definitely OK with Walt killing Kraze8; it was self-defense." The word "necessity to kill" came up in another answer of the participant, when the perpetrator killed an innocent chemist, Gale, because the latter might take his place in the drug laboratory, which could lead to the murder of the perpetrator. The participant called Gale an "accessory" and considered that "nothing else could have saved Walt's life". Another time the participant considered the murders committed by the perpetrator a necessity was in the two last seasons; the justification for one of the murders in the opinion of the participants was: "I think this happened when he felt his family is threatened", and regarding the murder of 9 prisoners, the participant "understand(s)" because "they can turn on him and say his name to the police. He is protecting himself by killing them; he has to do it not to get caught". Throughout the five seasons, the participant believed that the perpetrator "did not intend on things to go this bad so he doesn't deserve what is happening to him". The participant recognized: "The dilemma is that I see the lack of moral, but I accept it because it's protecting Walt from being caught". At the end of the series, the participant considered that the actions of the perpetrator were, as a whole, justified: "I know at the end he was not doing it for his family anymore. But that motive did not change me rooting for him or wanting him to get away with it, maybe it's because of the initial motive that is still stuck in my head, and maybe that's why I justify all his actions".

Before watching *Game of Thrones*, the participant stated: "I could justify murder for the right reasons but not torture" and that "power in a series is needed up to a certain extent; this factor gets me attached to a character if he knows how to manage this power". One example was the character Cersei. "I hated her initially" were the

words of the participant who, in season six, saw this character in a different light and justified her killing half of the main characters all at once in an explosion scene: "now she has a plan, she was patient and she killed everyone who was against her; I understand her now. I don't see her as cruel anymore. She deserves this power".

Early on in the first season, When Khal Drogo killed Daenerys's brother, a disliked character, by graphically melting gold on his head, the participant considered that "the violence against him is needed. He deserved even more than that". Another character the participant likes is Jon Snow. When Jon Snow's team turned on him and he decided to decapitate one of them, the participant was "with the decapitation" and added: "I don't see it as violence; it's strategy to avoid future mutiny".

Level of exposure to violence, drugs

Before watching *Breaking Bad*, the participant was asked about her tolerance regarding the presence of weapons and graphic scenes in a television series. The presence of weapons did not bother her, as she had been exposed to guns in real life: "my dad carried guns since I was a child, in Lebanon, it's a sign of strength and manhood", so for the participant "the presence of guns in a series doesn't bother me". The participant had also been exposed to violence in her country, Lebanon: "there is no censure on Lebanese TV, so maybe I've been used to it. If a graphic scene comes on, I would watch it but be disgusted". Regarding drug use and drug deals, the participants said: "I am against drug use for sure, and against dealing, especially hard drugs". The participant reported having watched "6 to 7 episodes per day". The presence of guns, which was not a problem for the participant pre-series, was not a problem here: "The guns they bought are for self-defense because of the harsh business they are in". Regarding the series as a whole, the participant had "no problem" with the perpetrator cooking methamphetamine and selling it.

As for *Game of Thrones*, the participant had been exposed to hunting weapons and assault rifles in real life, given that his father likes to hunt as a hobby. Pre-series, the participant reported being "indirectly exposed to violence on TV and on national Lebanese news". The participant also reported being "disgusted" by rape, and "would want to kill the rapist". *Game of Thrones'* seasons is each made up of 10 episodes of 50 minutes each. The participant reported watching "between 2 and 5 episodes per day". Season 1 portrays 48 deaths and 5 rapes in total, the first episode alone containing 3 violent deaths and 4 sexual scenes. The participant stated "Obviously the violence is more than other shows. It's good to let the viewer know from the beginning, I know what to expect". Season 2 portrays 92 deaths and 2 rapes. The participant noticed that the violence is "more than season 1" but



Image 1. Stills of the scene in which the perpetrator melts a body in a bath tub.

justifies most violence “because of power, respect or revenge, except Joffrey’s violence”. Season 3 portrays 65 deaths and 2 rapes. The participant saw the violence as increasing “but less bothering”. Season 4 portrays 48 deaths, 5 rapes. The participant reported: “either less violence or I’m adapting, I don’t know” and regarding rape scenes, stated: “I honestly don’t remember any rape scene during this season”. Season 5 portrays 48 deaths, 3 rapes, and the participant saw that “violence is a necessity at this point. You kill or you’re killed”. Season 6 portrays 48 deaths, 0 rape. The participant stated “the violence now is more meaningful and revenge-based. It doesn’t bother me. Even torturing for a cause doesn’t bother me anymore”.

From aversion to enjoyment

Throughout *Breaking Bad*, the participant was constantly exposed to graphic violence from season 1 to 5; there was a decomposition of a dead body by acid, graphic shootings in the heads of various characters, an overdose, slaughtering, and poisoning. Early on in the series, the perpetrator Walter White melted a body in acid to get rid of it. The participant was neither bothered nor disgusted “I actually laughed when the bath fell down” (Image 1). When the perpetrator strangled another victim in a very graphic scene showing his eyes bulge etc. the participant “didn’t flinch or grimace”. When Walter told his wife he is the danger, the participant found him “admired” and “respected”.

Regarding disliked or hated characters, the participant showed excitement at their deaths, such as “yes finally!” to one’s death, “I enjoyed the violence that was inflicted on them” to two characters who threatened the life of the perpetrator. When they were killed, the participant

claimed having “screamed: come on do it!” towards the character who shot them, and considered the shooting moment “amazing”. Members of a cartel were disliked characters as well, and when they are mass murdered by a poison, the participant described the scene as “brilliant” and “genius”. When Gus Fringe became a threat to Walter, the participant enjoyed his death scene, which was very graphic with half of his face burned off from an explosion. The participant found it “funny” and “in line with the character and his signature move of always fixing his tie”, which he did right before collapsing and dying (Image 2).

In *Game of Thrones*, the violence, incest, and rape are recurring themes. The point here was to see whether these themes were disturbing the participant from start to end, or did he move from being disturbed to enjoying these scenes.

Regarding the recurring violence, the participant seemed to have a positive view of violence committed by liked or favored characters. In fact, when Khal Drogo graphically pulled the tongue of an adversary (Image 3), the participant, when asked about the scene, mimicked the move with a smile and says: “It was really cool. I wouldn’t usually like such a scene but I did”. When Khaleesi watched motionless her husband murdering her brother, the participant loved the fact that “she didn’t flinch”. As for the hanging ordered by Jon Snow involving a young boy who betrayed him (Image 4), the participant “enjoyed it happening” and considered “it’s a deserved death for traitors”.

When it came to disliked characters, the participant seemed to enjoy their demise and violence inflicted on them. When the sister of Rob Stark avenged her dead brother by feeding the killer his own sons, and then slaughtering him, the participant reported it was “beyond my expectations” and he “loved the scene”. When Jon



Image 2. Graphic death of Gus Fringe.



Image 3. Khal Drogo graphic tongue rips.



Image 4. Graphic hanging of a young boy who betrayed Jon Snow.

Snow was hitting a hated character named Ramsay, the participant “loved Jon hitting him and making him feel pain”. When Sansa fed this same character who tortured

her on repeated occasions to his own dog, the participant stated that the scene being “very satisfying” and that he “enjoyed it”. The Purple Wedding featured the death of



Image 5. Joffrey's graphic death.



Image 6. Rape scene v/s Love scene of the same couple.

Joffrey, a character towards whom the participant has built-up anger and hatred from season one up till season four; this episode. The participant claimed he was “ready to stop watching” and that it was “the greatest weddings in the history of weddings”. In fact, the hated character Joffrey started choking, then his face changed colors and he graphically died choking from poisoning (Image 5). The participant reported “laughing”, “so much fun watching his agony”, and even claimed having paused the episode “to watch his ugly face switching colors”. For the participant, it was “the perfect death to an atrocious human being”. It was “the absolute best scene of season four”.

Regarding incest in the series, two main characters commit incest; a brother and a sister are in a relationship from the beginning of season one till the end of the series. The first sex scene between them had the participant thinking “why would they do that?” The scene came up randomly and the participant “didn't expect it”.

He felt “disgusted” and kept repeating “why”. After numerous portrayal of the couple, in season three, the participant had “no thoughts towards the scene” where the couple is reunited. In season four, the participant states “I don't see their couple as incest anymore; they are two people in a relationship” and “I didn't even think she was his sister until you mentioned it”.

When it comes to rape, the first rape scene between the newly married Khal Drogo and Daenerys Targaryen affected the participant who says he is “bothered” and feels “she is a trade slave”. In the next episode, the character shifted from being raped to learning to please the husband. The participant saw her as getting stronger because of this move, and thought “it's a good idea”. The following episodes portray the same couple as in love (Image 6). The participant considered that at this point they are a “powerful couple”, there was “no problem in how they started” and stated: “I have goosebumps for his power”.



Image 7. Jane overdosing.

Decrease of emotional responsivity/ presence or absence of empathy

In *Breaking Bad*, when the participant faced the scene where the perpetrator watches a girl overdose and die without helping her (Image 7), the participant's thoughts about the scene were: "what did you expect from being a heroin addict; that's what you get" and considered that "she deserved it". In many other scenes that were stated before, the participant was not bothered by various murders, claiming they were "necessities" to keep the perpetrator alive or not caught by the police. The fact that the perpetrator cooks methamphetamine and sells it, ending up with an entire drug empire didn't bother the participant "I had no problem with it".

In *Game of Thrones*, in the first five minutes of the first episode, there is a beheading, as well as a scene with body parts spread all around. The participant felt "disturbed" and "disgusted". In season 2, a very similar scene is portrayed, with horses' not human body parts. The participant stated not being bothered by this scene and that at this point "if I watch again the first episode, it wouldn't bother me". When reaching season 3, the participant was not bothered by the killing of a character who is a prostitute, shot with arrows and displayed in a graphic scene; the participant considered "this type of violence as normalized now". Also around the end of season 3, a liked character, Daenerys Targaryen, burned a man alive with her dragon. The participant, when asked about Daenerys Targaryen, said: "I don't remember any violent scene involving her". At some point, one of the characters sacrifices his young daughter and burns her alive, in a graphic scene which did not bother the participant who found it "a normal scene". Battle scenes with men dying by the thousands, corpses piling up, and explosions burning people alive didn't bother the

participant; on the contrary he described them as "basic violence" and "they were too long it became boring". At some point, he only saw them as "a bunch of dead bodies". Regarding the incestuous relationship of the brother and the sister, after a few seasons, the participant did not see the couple as incest anymore: "they are two people in a relationship". The participant reported tolerating rape scenes and torture scenes more than he used to. The incest didn't affect him after a while and he "stopped caring about the violent scenes".

Aggressive thoughts

While watching *Breaking Bad*, the participant experienced aggressive thoughts, mainly towards disliked characters, or characters trying to harm the main character for whom the participant was rooting. For example, the two twin cousins who appeared throughout season 3, cartel members sent to kill Walter White, had the participant on edge. Words such as "fuck them", "they are animals", "I want someone to kill them already" were recurring when the participant was asked about these characters. In addition, they were described by the participant as "animals and savages".

In *Game of Thrones*, the first hated character by the participant was Joffrey Baratheon. When asked about him, the participant said: "I despise him... he is a piece of shit and useless" and wished him "a slow agonizing death". The participant reported "anger at the sight of him" and that he "cannot wait for Joffrey to die". When the Purple Wedding episode came up, and the participant watched Joffrey, described as "a horrible human being and a monster" die, the participant paused the scene "to watch his ugly face switching colors". The other constantly hated character was Ramsay Bolton. When he first

appeared, and started graphically torturing a character from his fingers to cutting off his genitals, the participant said: "I don't even know what to feel towards Ramsay; I could say I want to kill him but I'm afraid of him". The participant described Ramsay as "the new Joffrey" in his eyes after Joffrey's death, and kept repeating "when is this guy going to disappear?" At some point, the participant said "I want to go into the TV and throw and feed him to his dogs" after this character fed others to his dogs. This actually happened, when Jon Snow caught him, and Sansa, a repeatedly abused character by Ramsay, fed him to his own dogs in a very graphic scene.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative case study was objectively describing the reactions of the participants after repeated exposure to violent scenes, torture, gore, and drugs. This description was matched to the short-term effects of the theory of desensitization, which gave a first descriptive look at whether the signs shown by participants match the signs of desensitization.

Nature of the perpetrator

According to Bandura's Social Learning theory, the nature of the perpetrator affects identification; a viewer is more likely to identify with and therefore root for an attractive perpetrator. In *Breaking Bad*, the participant started the first episode by feeling nothing but pity for the main character, Walter White, who at first appears as a chemistry teacher diagnosed with lung cancer. At this point, she described him as a loser who is, in her own words, "colorless, odorless, and tasteless" and has no respect or liking for the character. The participant only changed her perspective regarding the perpetrator when he changed his physical appearance and started committing acts of violence. This is where she described him as smart, attractive, manly, respected, feared and violent. Throughout the series, the participant kept rooting for Walt, who developed into a violent drug dealer, blurring the line between right and wrong. Another violent character, this is in line with previous literature where Bruce Mc. Keown's research states that the viewer experiences vicarious relationship with the "glamour of evil". In fact, the character himself admits later on in the series that everything he did was for his own need of power rather than for his family like he stated early on in the series. But even though, the audience still embraces this anti-hero.

In *Game of Thrones*, the liked character by the participant is Daenerys Targaryen. A possible explanation could be that the character is physically extremely attractive, and gains power and respect exponentially as

the series advances. This is reflected in previous literature where Tom van Laer, senior lecturer in Marketing at the University of London, discovered that some people watch the show because they can relate to the battle between good and evil (Van Laer, 2017).

Therefore, it can be stated that both Lebanese participants watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* like a character because they are attracted to said character's power. This is in line with previous literature stating that the "glamorization" of media is apparent in the attractive portrayal of the characters and their behavior, making their violence acceptable, like Bonnie and Clyde (Giles, 2003). Statistics from a study entitled *The Influence of Media Violence on Youth* showed that 44% of violent interactions involve attractive perpetrators with whom the viewer can identify, which is also a glamorizing factor of media violence (Anderson et al., 2003).

Justification of violence, lack of morals, drug use and drug deals

Research confirms that justified violence in the media increases aggressive responses from the viewer, and decreases their inhibition towards violence, therefore creating desensitization (Berkowitz, 1967, 1984, 1990).

In the previous section, it was stated that the participant watching *Breaking Bad* was drawn to the main character, Walter White, who is the perpetrator. It was also established that the participant only started admiring and rooting for the perpetrator after his first act of violence, and not when he was still a simple school teacher diagnosed with cancer. In fact, the participant mentioned empathy, but not when the perpetrator found out he had cancer; the participant empathizes with the perpetrator's violence and immoral acts because he is doing them to provide for his family before dying of cancer. This apparently led the participant to accept the murders committed by the perpetrator, even calling them necessities to save his life and not get caught by the police. After finishing the whole series, the participant considered that, as a whole, all of Walter White's actions were justified; even though she was aware that he was not doing them for his family anymore, she still rooted for him. In this case, the participant isn't justifying Walter White's actions simply because he is doing them for his family; the participant is drawn to the violent perpetrator, which allows her to accept his actions, and justify them, while still being aware they are immoral. This is in line with the literature review of the New York Times, when Vince Gilligan, creator of *Breaking Bad*, marveled over the fact that fans were still rooting for him even after he became a meth drug lord and still root for Walt and consider him a hero after committing lawless acts and murders.

Regarding *Game of Thrones*, before starting the series,

the participant stated in a pre-interview that in his opinion, power is needed in a series, and it is a factor that gets him attached to the character if the character knows how to manage his power. In fact, the participant justifies the violence of three different characters, all three being very powerful: Khal Drogo's killing Daenerys' brother is needed, Jon Snow decapitating a member of his team who betrayed him is a strategy to avoid future mutiny, and Cersei exploding the Sept is a patiently thought-of plan to kill whoever was against her. It can be said that the Lebanese participant watching *Game of Thrones* justifies the violence of powerful characters who are committing those violent acts for reasons.

Therefore, it is clear that both Lebanese participants watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* justify the violence and immoral acts of powerful perpetrators they admire, respect, and are drawn to and consider their violence to have some sort of validation.

Level of exposure to violence, drugs

According to Smith and Donnerstein (1998), repeated exposure leads to the desensitization of the viewer to violence. After establishing that the participants are drawn to powerful and violent characters, and justify their actions as needed means to various ends, it is important to discuss how much they have been exposed to violence pre-series, and how intense was their viewing of each series they were assigned. Both Lebanese participant, the woman who was assigned *Breaking Bad* and the man who was assigned *Game of Thrones*, said pre-series that the presence of weapons on-screen did not bother them, given the fact that they were both exposed to guns since early childhood. It is part of the Lebanese culture to own guns, whether as a sign of manhood, or for the hunting hobby. Both participants also reported being exposed to media violence in their country, Lebanon, where there is no censure on national TV. Therefore, both participants are already familiar with on-screen blood and gore. Nevertheless, the participant watching *Breaking Bad* reported pre-series being against drug use and drug dealing, and the participant watching *Game of Thrones* reported pre-series being disgusted by the idea of rape and rapists. They were both repeatedly exposed to violence, drugs, incest and rape given the fact that they watched a combined average of 5 episodes per day. The participant watching *Breaking Bad*, viewing Walter White as a "businessman" rather than a criminal has obviously changed her mind on being against drug use and drug dealing after repeated exposure to her favorite character becoming a drug lord. The participant watching *Game of Thrones* reports in season 4 not recalling any rape scene, whereas the season portrayed 5 rape scenes. It is clear that after repeated exposure to violence and rape scenes throughout 40 episodes, the participant is experiencing signs of desensitization to on-screen violence such as

rape.

From aversion to enjoyment

Initial exposure to media violence produces aversion, fear and even disgust; innate negative responses to violence. However, after repeated exposure to screen-based media violence, the viewer becomes desensitized.

Regarding the violence portrayed on-screen on *Breaking Bad*, the participant did not experience initial aversion to the on-screen violence. The participant was not bothered by violence inflicted by her favorite character Walter White. She also enjoyed and was excited to watch the violence inflicted on disliked characters such as members of the cartel, or characters who wanted to hurt Walter White. This goes against the literature review of Zillmann and Weaver (1979), claiming that boys are more prone than girls to enjoy fright and violence in the media, especially adolescent boys who can then prove to their peers that they are undisturbed by horror, while girls prove their sensitivity by being disturbed and shocked. In this case, the participant, a Lebanese female adult, was enjoying the violence. A possible explanation could be that having been exposed to real life on-screen violence in her country Lebanon, the participant is more prone to enjoy fiction violence, rather than be disgusted by it, being previously used to the sight, as well as the fact that the participant is an adult, less easily frightened than a teenager. It should be noted that the participant found two very graphic scenes funny; the melting of bodies with acid that led to the fall of a house's bathtub from one floor to the other, and the death by explosion of Gus Fringe, who lost half of his face before collapsing and dying. Her reaction goes against the literature review of Patrick Reeden Keefe, a staff writer at the New Yorker who claimed that viewers were repulsed that *Breaking Bad* characters used acid to melt one of the dead bodies. Nevertheless, according to the literature review of Zillmann and Weaver (1979), humor is considered as a reward or positive reinforcement of violence; it increases the level of arousal, and may increase the desensitization of the viewer.

Nevertheless, at one point, the participant did go from aversion to enjoyment, not of the violence portrayed on-screen, but of the drug exposure. As stated in the previous section, before watching *Breaking Bad*, the participant was fully against drug use and drug deals. Given the fact that she was drawn to the character of Walter White whose violence she justified throughout the show, the participant changed her opinion on drugs to the point where she could not see the perpetrator as a criminal or drug lord, but rather a smart business man. The participant clearly went from aversion of drugs to enjoyment of their creation and sale in a smart way.

When watching *Game of Thrones*, the participant experienced the same reactions as the participant

watching *Breaking Bad* when it came to viewing violence; there was no initial aversion, but rather enjoyment of the violence inflicted by liked and powerful characters such as Khal Drogo and Jon Snow, as well as violence against hated characters such as Ramsay being fed to his hounds, and Joffrey choking and graphically dying. Even the hanging of a child is enjoyed by the participant because it is inflicted by the powerful and rightful character Jon Snow, and according to the participant, it is deserved since the child betrayed Jon Snow. In this case, the participant does not follow the norms of empathy towards a child, but encourages vengeance against traitors, regardless their age, gender, or race. A first possible explanation here is that the participant, just like the participant watching *Breaking Bad*, has already been repeatedly exposed to violence in Lebanon and therefore, has no aversion towards gore and graphic scenes. Another possible explanation would be the fact that, since the participant is drawn to powerful characters in the show, it is normal for him to enjoy the violence inflicted by these characters, a violence that he can justify, whereas when it comes to hated characters such as Joffrey and Ramsay, who he considers as tyrants, it is normal for the participant to enjoy the violence inflicted on them, considering it as deserved.

Nevertheless, on the counts of incest and rape, the participant watching *Game of Thrones* did experience initial aversion. In the case of incest, the participant was initially disgusted seeing a brother and a sister having sex, but after repeated exposure up till season 4, the participant started seeing them as a normal couple, and stopped thinking of them as siblings. Even if the participant did not reach the point of enjoyment of the sex scene, the taboo of incest did not negatively affect him anymore. The most obvious explanation here is the repeated exposure to the incest that normalized the taboo in the eyes of the participant. In the case of rape, the participant went from being bothered and seeing Daenerys as a sex slave, to accepting her strategic move of trying to please her husband, which eventually led the couple to fall in love, and the participant to enjoy them as a couple, without having any problem anymore at the way they started. This is in line with the literature review of Linz et al. (1988), when they exposed male undergraduates to five different movies that portray violence against women during five consecutive days. The comparison between the viewing on the first day and the viewing on the last day showed a decrease of the males' anxiety and depression. Viewers became comfortable with the anxiety-provoking situations.

Both Lebanese participants watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* enjoyed the violence on-screen, without going through initial feelings of aversion. This goes against the previous literature results of Fanti et al. (2009) in their paper *Desensitization to Media Violence over a Short Period of Time* where at first, during the first violent scenes, the college students

did not enjoy the on-screen violence and actually felt sympathy towards the suffering victims. However, this psychological impact was reduced after several violent clips, leaving the participants enjoying the violent scenes, and feeling less sympathetic with the victims. The most logical explanation would be that both Lebanese participants have been repeatedly exposed in their country Lebanon to real-life on-screen violence, therefore there is no initial feeling of aversion for viewing on-screen violence in the series. The fact that it is their favorite characters who are powerful and admired performing the violent acts also plays a role in their enjoyment of the violence. It is also logical that the violence is even more enjoyable when it is inflicted on hated characters.

Nevertheless, regarding subjects they did not agree upon pre-series, such as drugs, incest, and rape, the participants both felt initial aversion when exposed to these taboos, to later on accept them and, on certain counts, embrace them. This is possibly due to repeated exposure, as well as to the fact that the participants are drawn to the characters performing these taboos, therefore they can justify them and get on board with them.

Decrease of emotional responsivity, presence or absence of empathy

According to Ceballo et al. (2001) and Strasburger and Wilson (2002), desensitization attenuates cognitive, emotional and sometimes behavioral responses to violence; it appears through numbing and lack of response to a stimulus that should elicit a strong response.

While watching *Breaking Bad*, some violence was normalized in the eye of the participant instead of eliciting strong reactions. One prominent example is the graphic overdose of Jane, with Walter White standing on her bedside and letting her die. Instead of a strong reaction, whether disgust, shock, or aversion towards the violent scene, the participant considered that the drug addict got what she deserved, and her death was expected.

As for *Game of Thrones*, the participant who was disturbed by body parts in the first season, was not bothered by a similar scene in season 2, and his lack of emotions towards violent scenes also appears during battle scenes that he found boring instead of disgusting. This decrease of emotional responsivity is also apparent in the fact that the participant did not recall violence involving Daenerys Targaryen, when this specific character actually burned a man alive with her dragon, or when a character burned his own daughter alive and the participant was not affected by the graphic scene, but rather found it normal.

Both participants watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* experienced lack of emotional responsivity towards a lot of violent scenes that would

normally elicit strong feelings of disgust, shock, or aversion. This goes against the literature review of Tamborini et al. (1987) stating that the more viewers share the distress of the on-screen character, the more they experience dysphoria towards violence, therefore having more empathy with the victim.

Aggressive thoughts

According to Anderson et al. (2003), exposure to media violence mainly creates a short-term increase in aggressive thinking and aggressive emotions which are attitudes and not physical actions. When the participant was watching *Breaking Bad*, she mainly experienced aggressive thoughts towards disliked characters and other characters trying to harm the main perpetrator Walter White. While watching, the participant reported having aggressive thoughts towards these disliked characters, wishing them death and cursing repeatedly.

Same goes to the participant watching *Game of Thrones*, and experiencing aggressive thoughts towards disliked characters committing acts of violence for no valid reason, such as Joffrey towards whom the participant's hatred is shown by the cursing he did at the mention of his name, as well as the many death wishes he had for him. The aggressive thoughts were also apparent at the death of Joffrey's character, during which the participant was calling Joffrey a monster. The participant also had aggressive thoughts towards Ramsay, and wished that he, himself, could throw him to get eaten by his own hounds.

Both participants watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* experienced similar aggressive thoughts than the one found in the literature review of Bushman and Huesmann (2007) in which a number of laboratory experiments as well as survey analysis came to the conclusion that youth who watch violent scenes subsequently display more short-term aggressive thoughts and emotions. A possible explanation would be that seeing their favorite character in danger, or watching a disliked character committing violent acts for no apparent or valid reason, angered the participants to a point where they wished similar violence committed by those perpetrators to be inflicted on them.

Conclusion

When the two Lebanese participants were asked to watch respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*, they were both drawn to perpetrators who were powerful, rather than weak characters. When those powerful perpetrators started committing violence and immoral acts, the participants kept justifying their actions. Both participants were repeatedly exposed to the two series violence; they watched between 2 and 5 episodes per day, each *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* episode

containing a high amount of respectively drugs, murders, death, rape, and incest. Given the fact that both Lebanese participants have been previously exposed to screen violence and real-life weapons in their country Lebanon where there is no censure on national television, and guns normally exist in households, both of the participants did not experience initial aversion to the violence portrayed on *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*; instead, they enjoyed the violence inflicted by the perpetrators, and the violence inflicted on hated characters. Nevertheless, the participants experienced initial aversion to subjects they stated pre-series they were against: the participant watching *Breaking Bad* stated before watching that she was against drug use and drug dealing, especially hard drugs. But after being drawn to and rooting for the perpetrator who starts cooking and selling methamphetamine, she did not see him as a criminal or a drug dealer, but rather a business man. As for the participant watching *Game of Thrones*, he reported pre-series agreeing on the taboo of incest, and being disgusted by the idea of rape. After watching several episodes then seasons of *Game of Thrones*, the participant, initially bothered and shocked, accepted a rape that turned into a loving couple, and stopped being affected by the sex scenes between siblings. The repeated exposure that both participants experienced decreased their emotional responsivity and empathy towards victims, especially disliked characters who were being tortured and killed, and increased their aggressive thoughts; in fact, while watching specific scenes, the participants would wish death and torture upon disliked characters or characters willing to harm their preferred perpetrator, and they would curse them out loud.

It is clear that the Lebanese participants experienced signs of desensitization after watching respectively *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*, which support the research question: After repeated exposure to *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*, the Lebanese viewer, even if already tolerant to on-screen violence, experienced desensitization signs to the violence, drugs, incest and rape portrayed on-screen. A main contribution of this research is the fact that Lebanese viewers studied qualitatively appear to be more tolerant to violence than American viewers, not experiencing initial aversion to on-screen violence. Nevertheless, the Lebanese viewers can still become desensitized to taboo subjects after repeated exposure such as incest or rape. It would be recommended for future research to apply the same methodology and themes to a bigger sample of the population, if the right experimental tools are available, in order to yield more generalizable results on the desensitization of the Lebanese audience to television series violence, rape, and incest.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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