

The Fourth Wave in Audiovisual Content: A True Achievement of Feminism?

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Audiovisual content transmits feminist messages and the identities of women and girls. There has been a revitalization of feminism, but are we facing a true achievement of critical and intersectional feminism? Or are we witnessing a form of fake feminism, multiplied by social media platforms, market forces, and entertainment? How are women's identities communicated through fictional audiovisual content today? To address these questions, this article examines the image of women projected by *Game of Thrones* (Season 8) and *Stranger Things* (Season 3) using the postulates of fourth-wave feminism. The principal conclusions of our study indicate that although the development of female characters in these series contains elements that suggest an approach to the demands of fourth-wave feminism, these prove to be meager and coexist with patriarchal features, and what predominates is the commercialization of messages that contribute to the banalization of feminism.

Keywords: fourth-wave feminism, television series, audiovisual content, feminist analysis

Since the mid-20th century, television series have been “builders of symbolic universes in which there is no articulation of social values, perspectives on life, and aspirations” (Gutiérrez & Gavilán, 2015, p. 23). Nowadays, these series constitute a social phenomenon that has strengthened the “hypnotic and addictive quality” (Marín, 2019, p. 27) that television possessed in past decades, reinforced by the emergence of digital platforms that have contributed to increasing the quality of this narrative product and, consequently, its translation into monetary value. Facing this increase, the analysis of series has become a privileged object of study for identifying the construction and evolution of the representation of certain groups, values, and ideas (Jager, 2003). Feminist communication studies have found in these audiovisual products an abundant source of case studies that serve for reflection on aspects such as power, class, or the representation of gender (F. J. López, 2015, p. 147).

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In a complex social context in which the impetus of fourth-wave feminism (FWF) is intermixed with the risk of falling into trivialization and emptying of feminism's real and transformative content, this article analyzes whether the image of women projected by such series reflects the characteristics of FWF and contributes to the spread of its messages, or whether it is a vehicle that contributes to the banalization of feminism. Concretely, the analysis we present focuses on two television series: *Game of Thrones* (Season 8) and *Stranger Things* (Season 3), broadcast in 2019 and selected according to two fundamental requisites: audience success and the role played by women by using the Bechdel-Wallace test and Butler's frames of reference.

Drawing on the contributions of earlier studies that address feminism or postfeminism in audiovisual content (Bernárdez & Moreno, 2017; Donstrup, 2019a, 2019b; Looock, 2018; Marín, 2019; Whelehan, 2010), this article opens a new path of study by applying the postulates of FWF to television series.

The article begins with a theoretical conceptualization of FWF that identifies the essential elements that characterize it: technological mobilization, intersectionality, empowerment, social activism, and the denunciation of sexual violence. These make it possible to subsequently establish the dimensions of the analysis: intersectionality as a demand and intersectionality/mainstreaming as banality, as well as women's sexuality, empowerment, activism, and the presence/use of social media. These dimensions are examined in greater depth through an inductive analysis of the selected series that reveals similarities and differences.

The Fourth Wave of Feminism

Our definition of FWF is centered on the search for elements that characterize it in order to establish indicators to guide our analysis of the series and enable us to identify whether they are in fact a megaphone for FWF and consequently a channel for socializing its messages, or whether they are a channel for the trivialization and banalization of feminism.

There are earlier studies that relate feminism and (post)feminism with audiovisual products and television series and study the role played by women characters (Bernárdez & Moreno, 2017; Donstrup, 2019a, 2019b; Marín, 2019), but they do not focus specifically on the characteristics of a still incipient and highly novel FWF. For that reason, our article conceptualizes the fourth wave as going beyond what has been defined as postfeminism, which is sometimes understood as resulting from the supposed achievement of the milestones of the earlier political agendas (Bernárdez & Moreno, 2017); it is described as a feminism lacking in demands that is experienced individually and assumed as a personal achievement (McRobbie, 2009), and is defined as "post, neoliberal and popular feminism" (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2020, p. 4). On other occasions, however, FWF is defined as a movement that is capable of overcoming the binarisms of gender and sex, and that is more focused on the recognition of diverse identities and corporalities (S. López & Platero, 2019). This definition has also been strongly criticized based on the consideration that such recognition runs the risk of leading to individualization and a strengthening of neoliberalism, weakening the political subject of feminism as a social and political movement (Valcárcel, 2019).

It is now a widely accepted opinion that FWF¹ emerged in the first decade of the 21st century, between 2001 and 2013 (Baumgardner, 2011; Cochrane, 2013; Kaplan, 2003; Looft, 2017) and that its relation to Internet and social media use (Chamberlain, 2017; Parry, Johnson, & Wagler, 2018; Shiva & Kharazmi, 2019) has served for diffusing the old and new messages of feminism, resulting in a rejuvenation of the movement (Maclaran, 2015; Munro, 2013).

In agreement with Shiva and Kharazmi (2019), we consider the following to be essential elements in the definition of FWF: technological mobilization (Chamberlain, 2017; Charles & Wadia, 2018; Looft, 2017; Parry et al., 2018; Shiva & Kharazmi, 2019; Zimmerman, 2017), intersectionality (Looft, 2017; Munro, 2013; Shiva & Kharazmi, 2019; Zimmerman, 2017), empowerment (Rivers, 2017), social activism (Davis, 2000; Rivers, 2017), and denunciation of sexual violence (Cochrane, 2013; Looft, 2017; Parry et al., 2018; Shiva & Kharazmi, 2019). We now establish their (new) relationship to feminism.

It would not be possible to speak of FWF, or even of feminism, if this did not involve social activism, social mobilization, and “tak[ing] global sisterhood seriously” (Kaplan, 2003, p. 51). The principal novelty in contemporary feminism’s social activism is, precisely, its relation to social media (Looft, 2017). Participation in social media—above all Twitter—through the use of hashtags generates virtual communities (Baumgardner, 2011), which not only exemplifies that the personal is political, but also that the emotional is political (Haraway, 1991) and that FWF is “the acknowledgment of an affectively intense period of feminist activism” (Chamberlain, 2017, p. 12). The generation of virtual emotional links produces feelings of belonging to virtual communities that are transferred into the offline sphere (Shiva & Kharazmi, 2019). The feeling of belonging to virtual communities is associated with two of the most relevant ideas feminism has traditionally disseminated: empowerment and sisterhood, which in turn acquire a new meaning in this context.

In FWF, the passage from individual to social empowerment acquires greater strength within the virtual communities and is in turn linked to activism, agency, transformation, and emancipation. Women are using technology to empower themselves by establishing networks that can facilitate organization (Sutton & Pollock, 2000). We are thus witnessing “a resurgence of feminist activism that is being driven primarily by the Internet” (Maclaran, 2015, p. 1732).

¹ Although the “waves” metaphor is not exempt from criticisms (Chafetz, 1997; Mann & Huffman, 2005; Nicholson, 1997; Purvis, 2004), it enables us to approach the thought and practice of feminism, which some European authors describe as “an unwanted child of the Enlightenment” (Valcárcel, 2008, p. 20). In the Anglo-Saxon context, the first wave of feminism is situated in the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century and was focused “on the abolition of slavery and the equality of citizenry” (Looft, 2017, p. 782). The second wave began in the United States in the 1960s and was focused on women’s rights in the fields of education and labor, reproductive freedom, sexuality, and sexual violence; it had recourse to mass activism, which is reflected in its media image (Schneir, 1994, p. xii). In the 1990s, Rebecca Walker coined the term *third wave*, a wave that would work to bring intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) into the analysis of women’s oppression and is characterized by its rejection of a set of shared policies or tactical priorities (Baumgardner, 2011) and by the defense of “an expanded definition of feminist activism as something individual, flexible” (Bronstein, 2005, p. 785).

Intersectionality in FWF becomes an objective that must be put into practice and its absence must be denounced, "the phrase 'privilege checking' is commonly used now as a call to build in more reflexive processes that question where our own viewpoint comes from, and to recognize the validity of other types of feminism" (Maclaran, 2015, p. 1735), and this is what the Queer movement has been asserting in its denunciation of heteropatriarchal domination. The intersectional perspective contributed by the feminist movement placed emphasis on the claim for recognition of diversity, which led Butler to observe that "there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes or ought to constitute, the category of women" (Butler, 1990, p. 1) based on the consideration that every identity is normative and, consequently, exclusionary at the same time. According to Munro (2013), "the political potential of the fourth wave centers around giving voice to those women still marginalized by the mainstream" (p. 25).

The exercise of mainstreaming could put FWF at risk of sliding into banality. This banality is reflected in feminist merchandizing and the role played by some famous personalities in support of specific campaigns. Looft (2017) considers this to be "one of the pitfalls of fourth wavers and our reliance on social media and celebrity culture to promote social justice campaigns" (p. 896). There is an intrinsic contradiction in feminist activism on social media: Its growth generates dissidence and discussion on the one hand, and considerable strength and social and political impetus on the other (Kaba, Smith, Adelman, & Gay, 2014).

One of the debates concerns the following question: How can we combine globalization with intersectionality in constructing a subject for international feminism? Fraser and Honneth (2003) recognize two types of struggles in feminism, one for redistribution, which advocates equality (class struggle), and the other for recognition, which underscores difference (LGTBIQ+). One cannot take place without the other, and both must problematize the different situations of privilege and power. The postfeminist debate tries to discern how the political subject of feminism is constructed: whether "women" should be a political subject that brings together common elements, the common condition (Morgan, 1984) derived from a common domination, or whether it should be deconstructed so as to be newly constructed, taking up the differences.

One of the central issues of FWF is gender violence and, concretely, sexual violence, its denunciation, and giving it visibility on social media using different hashtags #MeToo, #BeenRapedNeverReported, #girlgaze, and so on. This collective denunciation is relevant in establishing the new feminism (Ghadery, 2019). Recent feminist rhetoric makes disruptive use of technologies, enabling patriarchal structures to be subverted so as to give shape to new spaces of interaction for feminist voices in a restrictive sphere (Lane, 2015). But as Lane (2015) mentions, digital representations of the body are not neutral, which is why gender attacks are launched against a body that has been conquered and subjected by social and cultural mandates.

The relation between cyberspace and sexual violence not only refers to the use of social media to denounce situations of harassment, but the Internet has also become a space in which women's bodies are objectified and sexualized (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Linares, 2019). In a short time, we have moved from the first digital gender breach to the third, in which forms of online sexist violence are expressed (Linares, 2019). Freedom of choice is often confused with the unconscious acceptance of heteropatriarchal commands that transform the exhibition of free female sexuality into its depersonalization and reification as an erotic object. In these forms of violence one can appreciate power relations, asymmetrical positions, and hegemonic and heteronormative masculinities on the basis of which certain behavior and forms of violence are legitimized and normalized (Linares, Royo, & Silvestre, 2019). We could speak of a pornification of

culture (Paul, 2005) given that sexual practices characteristic of misogynist pornography are often normalized as a result of the increased consumption resulting from ease of access:

Fourth waves are highlighting how sex is increasingly normalized through contemporary popular culture, particularly the fashion and music industries, as well as social media. . . . For young people (but especially girls), there is huge pressure to create and maintain erotic capital. (Maclaran, 2015, p. 1735)

FWF will have to confront its own contradictions, while accepting that if we are witnessing a new wave it is thanks to the amplification provided by social media, the new generations of young women, and the combination of mainstreaming and intersectionality.

Method and Case Selection

Our analysis focuses on *Game of Thrones* (Season 8) and *Stranger Things* (Season 3), two television series seasons shown during 2019 that combined two main characteristics: audience success and the role played by women by using Bechdel–Wallace test and Butler’s frames of reference. The main objective of our analysis is to examine the image of women they broadcast to check the extent to which they are attached to the dimensions of FWF.

Audience Indexes as a Criterion for Identifying Series With the Greatest Social Impact

As many authors have stated, “Research on television discourse, and particularly television shows, is justified by the large audiences that engage daily with their fictional worlds, their characters and their language” (Gregori-Signes, 2017, p. 21). There are different mechanisms that are calculated using different variables to determine audience success. These can respond to different criteria defined by the tastes of spectators or quality criteria defined by the profession: production, sets, and budgets (Diego, Etayo, & Pardo, 2011).

Our selection combined indexes that respond to three different universes: the OTT barometer,² the IMDb ranking,³ and audience ranking by TV Time.⁴ Each of these sources provides different results. Whereas the OTT barometer analyzes only Spanish results, the IMDb ranking and the TV Time list provide data on

² The OTT barometer analyzes the universe of active users of digital platforms who are of adult age in Spain. For this purpose, it takes a sample of 4,000 online surveys with closed questions distributed to 100 individuals in four three-month waves. Thus, this barometer directly gathers the evaluation of the spectators.

³ The IMDb ranking is calculated by means of a formula that includes the number of marks that each series receives from users and the value of the marks received from regular users. To be included on the list, a series or miniseries must receive qualifications from at least 5,000 users, and a television series must also have emitted five episodes.

⁴ The North American consultancy firm TV Time extracts its data from its users, who evaluate different aspects of each television product: the users’ motives for consuming it, the channel through which it is accessed, what aspects attract users, and comparison with competitors on different platforms.

global consumption. OTT highlights six series: five that stand out because of audience figures (*Game of Thrones*, *Modern Family*, *Money Heist*, *Black Mirror*, and *Grey's Anatomy*) and one, *Stranger Things*, which stands out because of its audience loyalty. The IMDb ranking contains 48 series, of which the following coincide with the OTT barometer: *Game of Thrones* (42), *Stranger Things* (24), and *Black Mirror* (41). Finally, the 20 series designated by TV. Time include *Stranger Things* (2), *Money Heist* (5), and *Black Mirror* (12). *Stranger Things* was together with *Black Mirror* on the three lists, and it was highlighted by OTT barometer for its high audience loyalty. *Game of Thrones* was included in two of the three lists, and there is a wide consensus on the relevant impact of the show on audiences (Spanò, 2016; Thompson, 2017). The engagement of audiences with public connection explained by Nærland (2019) as link to politics and the gender implication of both *Game of Thrones* and *Stranger Things* led us to apply the second requisite condition to these two series.

Representation of Women:

Passing the Bechdel–Wallace Test and Butler's Frames of Reference

The Bechdel–Wallace test arose from its authors' reflections after reading *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf (Freitas, Rosenzvit, & Muller, 2016) and sought to reflect on the role of women in the cinema. As stated by Marín Ramos, it emerged from the feminist movement but has turned into a tool also used by gender and communication scholars (Marín, 2019, p. 34). This test establishes three conditions: (a) In a series or film, there must be more than two female characters with their own name; (b) these characters must speak to each other; and (c) they must speak about something that is not a man. The aim of these criteria is to determine the degree of development and empowerment of female characters, which is fully in line with one of the principal dimensions of FWF: empowerment, both individual female characters with their own names, and collectively they speak to each other about something that is not a man. Furthermore, since its appearance, this test has drawn the attention of not only people who are cinema users, but also academics who analyze this field using audiovisual products as their methodology of analysis (Garcia, Weber, & Garimella, 2014; Lawrence, 2011; Rughinis, Rughinis, & Huma, 2016). With the advent of new technologies, the process has been automatized (Freitas et al., 2016), and it is now possible to find archives and websites that analyze films on the basis of these three criteria. However, there is still no program or algorithm (or at least none that we have been unable to find) that automatizes the test for series. This is due to several reasons: First, it is necessary to have access to the screenplays of the series, which are not always easy to locate. In addition, it is necessary to determine whether all episodes of the series or only a certain percentage of episodes must meet these criteria.

To determine whether or not the series identified met the Bechdel–Wallace test, we obtained the screenplays and analyzed the number of female characters and their dialogues (see Figure 1). With respect to the number of female characters, the selected series have a wide range of female characters, as Figure 1 shows.

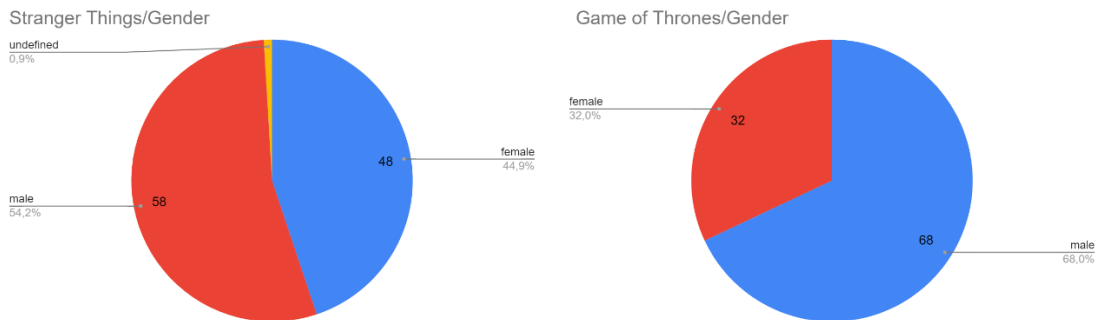


Figure 1. Female characters in the series.

There are male characters in each series, but the number and substance of the female characters are sufficient for considering that the two series meet the first of the requirements established by the Bechdel–Wallace test. Analysis of the dialogues also reveals that the female characters interact with each other in both cases. Nevertheless, the third criterion poses problems in nearly all of the episodes.

In the case of *Game of Thrones* (see Figure 2), analysis of the eight episodes of the series' eighth season showed that only in four of them do the female characters speak to each other about subjects other than a male character. It is true that in this final season there are several female characters who have acquired considerable strength and power. However, some of the most iconic, like Khaleesi or Cersei, dedicate a large part of their conversations to dialoguing with other women about their relationship with another man. Characters like Arya Stark or Lady Brienne counteract this tendency. As 50% of the episodes pass the test, we considered this series to be valid for our analysis.



Figure 2. Game of Thrones (images from Wikipedia).

In the third season of *Stranger Things* (see Figure 3), the female characters undergo a 180° turn that affirmed that the final installment does indeed pass the test. As we see in the analysis that follows, this

third season broke with the dynamics of male prominence of the two earlier seasons. In this third season, dialogues among female characters have not only increased with respect previous seasons, but also capture important messages related to the criteria described above. From the eight episodes of the season, at least four of them pass the test.



Figure 3. *Stranger Things (images from Wikipedia).*

Another important question is determining whether these female characters reproduce the frames of reference (Butler, 1990) of women themselves, or whether they are the product of a male view of women's roles and the dimensions identified by FWF. To that end, we determined the role that women played in the writing and direction of the episodes of the series to analyze the gaze that is projected and recognized in each of the series.

Of the eight episodes that make up *Stranger Things*' third season, only Episode 4 was written by a woman, Kate Trefry, and Episodes 5 and 6 were directed by Uta Briesewitz. If we look at the overall data for the series, only two women directors directed three episodes of 25 episodes, and four women appeared as writers of five episodes in the three seasons. Consequently, the series predominantly exhibits the gaze of the Duffer brothers, the main directors and writers, who also invited men to both direct and write more frequently. Nonetheless, the third season builds up a very significant percentage with respect to women's participation in the series, which might represent a change of tendency.

The six episodes of the eighth and final season of *Game of Thrones* were directed by four men: Miguel Sapochnik, David Nutter, and the producers of the series, David Benioff and Dan Weiss. Very few women (see Figure 4) were behind the cameras in this production. Outstanding in this respect is the director of photography, Anette Haellmigk, who also directed Episodes 4 and 5 of the third season. In the team of seven screenplay writers, there were two women: Jane Espenson, writer of one episode in the first season, and Vanessa Taylor, screenplay writer in Seasons 2 and 3. And there were also two women in the team of executive producers: Carolyn Strauss and Bernadette Caulfield.



Anette Haellmigk,
Cinematographer

Jane Espenson, Writer

Vanessa Taylor, Screenwriter



Figure 4. Women behind the cameras in Game of Thrones (images from Wikipedia).

Analysis of the Series

In our prior theoretical conceptualization, we sought and identified the elements that define FWF that emerged at the start of the 21st century. The definition of the variables of the object of study were deduced from the previous analysis of FWF in which we brought together issues that analyzed what authors consider to be specifically representative of FWF and that are necessarily indebted to the previous waves. Above all, the analysis was done by studying the female characters of the two series and observing whether or not they are instruments for transmitting FWF:

- Intersectionality as a demand: the existence of different female characters who exemplify women's diversity and the weight of the different vectors of inequality that have a bearing on their lives: age, ethnic group, social class, sexual orientation, functional diversity, and so on. Intersectionality as a demand requires the recognition and visibility of women's diversity as a denunciation of a unidimensional exposition and a critique of the mechanisms of oppression and privilege.
- Intersectionality/mainstreaming as banality: the reduction of intersectionality to individuality, when this individuality, in spite of permitting different identities to be shown, is alien to feminist discourse and de-ideologizes the message as a result of or as a requirement for its mainstreaming. Banality in series can also be observed in the utilitarian use of certain feminist messages or icons, with the sole aim of being "cool," but without any critical or transformative intention.
- Women's sexuality: a claim and denunciation, or reification and pornification of culture? The experience and exposition of women's sexuality, and that of individuals in general, paying attention to their extremely wide diversity and questioning binary structures of classification, are clear features of FWF. In our analysis, we study whether the sexuality of the leading female characters is an expression of empowerment and individual freedom, or whether their sexuality is objectified and favors its exposition in the context of a pornification of culture, in which sexual uses and practices that involve the submission and exploitation of women are normalized. Similarly, we analyze whether there is inclusion of forms that are alternative to heteronormativity and in the way this is done.

- Empowerment (individual and/or social): increases women's personal confidence and self-esteem, but must be accompanied by participation in decision-making processes and access to power with the aim of social transformation for it to be possible to speak of social empowerment.
- Activism (related to social empowerment): a consequence of social empowerment and sisterhood and expresses the communion of women's interests and their joint expression.
- Presence/use of social media or the Internet: use of social media as a medium for transmitting messages of FWF, and also as a means of entry for younger and more diverse women and for new messages and proclamations. This has shown itself to be an essential element in the definition of FWF. On this point, our analysis is somewhat limited given that the selected series take place in historical contexts, real or fictitious, when the Internet as we know it today did not exist. Nonetheless, other channels of communication and for transmitting information do acquire significance.

From this point onward, the concretization of these dimensions is developed on the basis of an inductive analysis of the selected series.

Stranger Things

From its first season, some authors have argued that *Stranger Things* contributes an alternative view of the masculinity that was characteristic of the period (1980s) when the series is set (Mollet, 2019). However, during the first two seasons, there is a clear predominance of male characters, in spite of the weight of Eleven as a character. The way in which female characters—Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers, or Eleven—are projected reproduces patriarchal stereotypes such as weakness (e.g., Nancy is saved by Jonathan), sexualization of adolescence (e.g., Nancy's loss of her virginity), or relations of friendship subordinated to relations with men (e.g., the relation between Nancy and Barb). Even Eleven with her superpowers is barely able to communicate and has few lines of dialogue, often limited to scenes of torture at the hands of her father. Not even with the introduction of Max, an independent and intelligent young man, are these dynamics broken. Instead, the female characters reproduce patterns of teenage rivalry because of their acceptance of the male characters. Nevertheless, in the third season, the characters evolve in a way that spells a change in the future development of the series. This season presents elements that connect with the dimensions identified by FWF.

Intersectionality

Although it is true that, in general, there is a predominance of White, working-class characters in the series, during the third season, the character of Erica Sinclair gradually acquires prominence. "Lucas's sister" makes her appearance and as the episodes advance, she takes on a leading role. With her incorporation, the social composition of the group of female characters is diversified. Some authors have argued that prior to these incorporations, the group of teenagers provided a good reflection of the

intersection of different vulnerabilities: class, race, disability, and gender (McDaniel, 2019). However, the heterogeneity and representation of different types of female roles are completed with the insertion of Erica and Robin. Besides racially diversifying the group, Erica shows herself to be an empowered character from the outset. From the first moments of the season, she stands by her opinions and does not allow herself to be intimidated. When Dustin, Steve, and Robin want her to get into the laboratory through the air conduit, she weighs the situation, evaluates the risks, and states the reward she considers to be fair for her work. Her dialogues with Dustin throughout this season are an example of the exchange of solid and well-founded arguments, which culminates in the sixth episode when, after providing evidence of her mathematical skill, Dustin includes her in the group of “nerds.”

Women’s Sexuality

For her part, Robin is the first openly homosexual character in the series. Despite the insinuation at one point in the third season of Will’s homosexuality, defined by Wetmore (2018) as the “queer” (p. 150) element, he expresses a general disinterest in sex. However, the dialogue between Robin and Steve in Episode 7 gives a new twist to the plot that appears to be a romantic relation between the two of them. Robin draws a distance from the stereotypes that characterize other series, in which the sexual identity of an LGBTBIQ character is what defines them. On the contrary, we are seeing a character with enough ingenuity, resolve, and courage to be worthy of joining the gang, and she maintains her strength of character after ending her amorous relation with Steve.

This season also marks a change in the way violence is portrayed. In previous seasons, a great deal of violence was inflicted on Eleven by her “dad” (Dr. Brenner) and on Max at the hands of Billy. This third season reflects on the transformation of Billy, in the past a sensitive boy, and now an icon of toxic and violent masculinity. Instead of showing the intrafamily violence directly, the drama of the gender violence is shown indirectly by recounting how Billy is transformed by the separation from his mother and the maltreatment of his father. Unlike other occasions, there is no blaming the woman in the face of maltreatment and deceit. Instead, Episode 6 shows how he was a sensitive child who recalls the moments with his mother as moments of happiness to the extent that in the final battle, it is the recollection of his mother that leads him to his final sacrifice.

Empowerment

During this season, we also observe the collective empowerment of its female characters. The women from the Wheeler family provide a good example. On the one hand, Nancy experiences the sexism and contempt of her colleagues at work in the newspaper. She insists on defending her investigation to the very end, although this costs her job. Her mother, for her part, whose relation with Nancy in earlier seasons had reproduced the stereotypes of mother–teenage daughter relationships, makes an excellent plea for empowerment in Episode 4. This change also takes place in the “gang.” In the first two seasons, the prominent role of the four male members of the gang meant that characters, even one as strong as Eleven, were solely defined in terms of their relationships with male characters, a clear example of Pollitt’s (1995) “Smurfette Principle” (p. 153). However, the relation developed by Max and Eleven, based on friendship and trust, plays a key role not only in the development of the two characters, but also in the empowerment of Eleven, who comes to understand that she can develop social relationships beyond Mike and Hooper.

Technological Revolution/Social Media

Stranger Things is set in the United States in the 1980s, when the technological revolution was still at an embryonic phase. Nonetheless, the series contains an important technological component in addition to the military technology it displays, because, from the start of the series, communications play an essential role in the plot. From the outset, the telephone, lights, and walkie-talkies play an essential role for Joyce to be able to communicate with Will. In this season, communications technologies, concretely the radio, are additional characters from the start to the end of the series, present at the beginning and in the denouement. In addition, we cannot ignore the fact that it is Suzie who helps the gang save itself and "save the world" by solving a mathematical equation.

We do not have data to be able to say that this evolution of the female characters in the third season is directly related to audience reactions to the two earlier ones, but it is true, as Bartlett (2017) notes, that opinions about the series on the Internet were divided. This author also observes that when portraying a deeply conservative decade such as the 1980s, it is difficult to add elements from a feminist position, but it is precisely for that reason that we value those mentioned previously.

Game of Thrones

Gjelsvik and Schubart (2016) note that *Game of Thrones* "ha[s] been read as both feminist and antifeminist, as subversive and repressive" (p. 1). Although there is no agreement, it is highly likely that these dichotomies coexist with the contradictions inherent in FWF. The audience figures for the series show that *Game of Thrones* "isn't just a boy's show. In fact, women account for 42% [of the show's] viewers" (Frankel, 2014, p. 1). Frankel (2014) also reminds us that the actresses who formed part of the cast were very satisfied with the characters they played, with their strength and what they stood for; the author of the original book, George R. R. Martin, regards himself as a feminist because he created powerful female characters and treated them in the same way as the male characters (Frankel, 2014). Many feminist women were fans of *Game of Thrones* (Gjelsvik & Schubart, 2016) and experienced the contradiction of identifying with the strength of some of the female characters in the series and, at the same time, the difficulty of escaping from the patriarchal and misogynist framework that finally snares them.

Empowerment

There are many and varied female characters in *Game of Thrones*. In this analysis, we focus on those who are still alive in the last season. The majority reach the last season politically and personally empowered: Cersei Lannister is queen of Westeros, the Stark sisters take decisions in the North, and Daenerys Targaryen has managed to assemble a great army and participates in the defeat of the White Walkers. The final season involves the struggle of two women, Cersei and Daenerys, for the Iron Throne, to which neither will accede. The strength of the characters and the behavior, characteristics, and decisions that empower them are archetypically male: "The women must reject their feminine side to operate in the men's sphere" (Frankel, 2014, p. 2).

According to the definition of empowerment (Silvestre & Royo, 2019), self-confidence and self-esteem, elements that were not always present in the life of the protagonists, are finally attained by those who

reach the final season. It also presupposes participation in decision-making processes and access to the exercise of power, a situation in which we find Cersei Lannister, Daenerys Targaryen, and the Stark sisters. However, there is also a third essential element that refers to the capacity to influence the transformation of the structures that produce women's subordination, and in this regard, we think that women's empowerment in *Game of Thrones* is not complete. Only Sansa Stark ends up ruling, and we do not know whether her reign will manage to put an end to the whole hierarchical and patriarchal framework of the North.

The empowerment of the women in *Game of Thrones* is individual empowerment, in which sisterhood and social empowerment are barely found. We observe sisterhood in the relationship of the Stark sisters, clearly visible in the episode in which they manage to put paid to Littlefinger, but this is more a question of blood ties. Brienne Tarth protects the women of the Stark family, and there is also a clear friendship between Daenerys Targaryen and Missandei, but in these latter two cases, we cannot strictly speak of sisterhood because the relations are mediated by an asymmetrical power structure. Two secondary characters, Asha Greyjoy and Lyanna Mormont, represent empowerment, strength, and commitment to the group, but more from criteria of male fraternity than sisterhood. In fact, the series reinforces the prejudice that women are enemies of women: We have a clear example in the inability of the Stark sisters to establish a link of sisterhood with Daenerys Targaryen.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is present in the series as the female characters are different according to their origin, ethnic group, class, age, and sexual orientation. The female characters are strong or weak and represent several archetypes: queens, widows, women warriors, damsels in distress, career women, priestesses, mothers, and maidens. However, the problem is that the majority of them play a single role without any nuances (Frankel, 2014). It is remarkable that one of the characters who most questions heteropatriarchal gender commands, Arya, plays the key role in finishing off the Night King. Nonetheless, in the eighth season, the series' producers decide that two female characters, who had been pursuing sexual options other than heterosexuality and had been portrayed to some extent as androgynous, should have sexual relations with men: Arya Stark has a relationship with Gendry and Brienne Tarth with Jamie, as if it were necessary to make the heteronormativity of the female characters abundantly clear, a fact that contrasts with the final sublimation of the incestuous relationship of Cersei Lannister and Jamie who perish together under the rubble.

Women's Sexuality

Game of Thrones has given us powerful female characters, referents of strength, empowerment, and personality, characters who are diverse, even complex, but whose bodies have been objectified and their sexuality has been literally subjected to degrading situations and, subliminally, to the final imposition of heteronormative commands.

Sexuality is a key issue for analyzing *Game of Thrones* from the perspective of FWF. According to Thompson (2017), misogyny, sexism, rape, and sexual objectification are present in *Game of Thrones* as elements that devalue and damage the women portrayed. The treatment of sex and sexuality evolves with the series. In the first seasons, brothels, prostitutes, sexual maltreatment, and rape are very present. But as the series develops and the female characters become empowered, the sexualization of the leading characters is

reduced; nonetheless, sexuality as a female instrument of political seduction is a constant element throughout the series. We can say that in *Game of Thrones* there is an exaltation of the pornification of culture. The treatment of rape and, above all, the analysis carried out by part of the audience, which justifies this using criteria of historical realism (Thompson, 2017), mask the fact that "rape narratives are gendered, raced and classed and that the distinction between 'real' and unreal rape involves silencing some women's experiences in order to preserve (privileged) male futures" (Ferreday, 2015, p. 22). Stéphanie Genz argues that Western culture at the start of the 21st century is characterized by both its sexualization and the integration of pornography, and that "such sexualized aesthetics are linked to ideas of postfeminist empowerment and neoliberal agency" (as cited in Gjelsvik & Schubart, 2016, p. 13). In *Game of Thrones*, we find the contradiction found in FWF when women's sexual freedom is proclaimed from the perspective of neoliberal criteria that are hardly liberating for women. Women's bodies are objectified and sexualized, subjected to maltreatment and raped. Not one female character in the series escapes from this sexualized objectification.

It is interesting to focus on the message of the "Mother of Dragons" given that we have not so far analyzed the issue of maternity because it does not appear among the dimensions of FWF. Nonetheless, maternity plays a fundamental role in some of the powerful female characters in the series: It is very important for the matriarch of the Starks, Catelyn Stark, and it is essential in Cersei Lannister (her love for her sons and her pain and anger on losing them inspire and guide her actions), and in Daenerys Targaryen, whose identity becomes that of the "Mother of Dragons." Counterposed to this, the series does not attribute a similar weight to paternity in the male characters.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the series based on the defining elements of FWF allows us to affirm, like Zeisler (2016), that feminism has become cool. It is undeniable that there is an interest in including empowered, autonomous, and independent female characters. In the series analyzed, diverse women are included and there is a predominance of young women. There is no question that they are intended to serve as referents for other women and that provocative feminist messages are used to sell products associated with the series. Therefore, the feminist messages launched by these two series are aligned with the tendency highlighted by Donstrup of using television series to strengthen role models for women, especially younger women. Eleven, Max, Robin, or Erica in *Stranger Things*, and Khaleesi, Cersei, or Arya in *Game of Thrones* have been made into strong women and heroines whom the audience, and especially women, have identified as an example of the contemporary woman who breaks traditional roles (Donstrup, 2019a).

Nonetheless, many productions that are well constructed from the feminist perspective incur contradictions because of their not "getting rid of certain sexist patterns that dominate our culture" (Marín, 2019, p. 42) and because they fall into the idealized representation of women and their struggle, an example of which is the demand for control of emotions as a path for achieving objectives and power. Both *Game of Thrones* and *Stranger Things* repress the emotions of women as if this was a necessary requisite for their empowerment and idealize their capacity for reaching their personal attainments and goals.

However, the series do not meet all the requirements that define FWF. Empowerment is basically individual, but sisterhood has a supportive character and barely any demand is made for new ways of experiencing women's sexuality. In *Game of Thrones*, the female characters prove to be powerful; however,

the characteristics that empower them are archetypically male. On many occasions, we note that the empowerment is individual: It does not seek sisterhood or questions the patriarchal order, which is why it is more in line with the idea of popular feminism or neoliberal feminism, terms coined by Banet-Weiser and Gill, respectively (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 4). The relationship developed by Eleven and Max in the third season and Mrs. Wheeler's support for her daughter are small examples of an emergent sisterhood and empowerment in *Stranger Things*. With respect to sexuality, we observed that *Game of Thrones* reproduces the contradiction existing in FWF when it proclaims the sexual freedom of women based on neoliberal criteria that are hardly emancipatory for them; the sexual cliché of women's using sexuality as an instrument of social and political advancement is reiterated. Although in *Stranger Things* a character like Robin emerges as an LGTBIQ+ representative, the way in which sexuality is tackled evinces the prejudices that still persist regarding nonheteronormative sexual orientations, especially in women.

The greatest contradiction in the two series, especially *Game of Thrones*, is the sexualization of the bodies of the female protagonists, although we must admit that this contradiction is also something intrinsic to the relation of FWF with the online world.

Stranger Things incorporates young women and teenagers who increase the diverse and empowered female referents, facilitating the transmission of characteristic FWF messages to younger audiences. It also incorporates the technological element, although far removed from today's use of technologies because of the historical context of the series that is set in the 1980s with its fixed telephones, radios, and walkie-talkies. Furthermore, in both cases, social media and the debates that have taken place there on the evolution of the characters and plots have undoubtedly reproduced the debates underscored by FWF on the diversity, empowerment, and sexualization of the characters.

Although there are elements that make it possible to see an approach in the female characters' development toward the demands of feminism, and above all FWF, this intersectionality could contribute to a banalization of the feminist message, converting it into a mere commercial slogan or instrument for increasing audiences. Elements that make it possible to glimpse the incorporation of diverse, empowered, and feminist characters are still scant and are incoherent with other elements of this type of audiovisual production. On the contrary, there is a predominance of a commercialization of the messages to align them with popular culture. A clear example of this is provided by the incorporation of feminist messages in fashion collections by making use of characters from both series, distorting the content and substance of the latter.

This article opens new research lines in the future, such as the possibility of investigating the debates on social media about the feminist messages of the series, and their influence on the consumption of this audiovisual product by women, or analyzing in greater depth the messages included in the different merchandizing products.

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