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**“WE HAVE A BLACK GAY MAN ON A DRAGON”: Fan Reactions to
Diversity and Representation in Fantasy Media**

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Résumé

Ces dernières années, plusieurs films et séries télévisées ont suscité des débats en ligne après avoir donné des rôles clés à des acteurs issus des minorités visibles, ou mis de l'avant des personnages féminins principaux et des histoires LGBTQIA+. L'intensité de certaines réactions contre la diversité dans les médias au cours des dernières années justifie un examen plus approfondi de cette question. De plus, bien que la négativité et les attitudes anti-diversité sur l'internet soient très visibles et souvent rapportées dans les médias, de nombreux fans célèbrent avec enthousiasme cette diversité accrue (comme le montre la citation contenue dans le titre « WE HAVE A BLACK GAY MAN ON A DRAGON »). Une meilleure compréhension de ces réactions (positives et négatives) peut fournir des indications précieuses sur les valeurs et les convictions des consommateurs, tout en éclairant les marques, entreprises, et organisations qui s'efforcent d'accroître la diversité et la représentation.

Cette recherche visait à répondre aux questions suivantes : Comment les fans de séries télévisées réagissent-ils et débattent-ils sur les médias sociaux de la diversité et de la représentation des minorités dans les médias ? Comment ces débats de fans peuvent-ils aider les chercheurs à mieux comprendre les perceptions plus larges de la diversité ?

Pour ce faire, elle a examiné les discours des fans en ligne concernant la diversité et la représentation dans la série fantastique *House of the Dragon* sur Twitter/X et Tumblr. Après analyse (*Ideal-type analysis*), quatre catégories de discours ont émergé: un enthousiasme véhément, des critiques progressives, des questionnements et détournements cyniques, et un rejet catégorique.

Ces discours contribuent à notre compréhension de l'opinion des consommateurs sur la diversité en soulignant les perturbations que les fans estiment qu'elle introduit (considérées par certains comme positives, par d'autres négatives), mais aussi la façon dont beaucoup la considèrent instrumentalisée et polarisée dans un contexte sociopolitique qui a politisé la représentation.

Mots clés : Fans, Netnographie, Discours en ligne, Diversité, Représentation, EDI

Méthodes de recherche : Qualitatif, Netnographie

Abstract

In recent years, several movies and TV series have been at the center of online firestorms after casting BIPOC actors in key roles, featuring main female characters, or foregrounding LGBTQIA+ stories. The intensity of some of the backlash against media diversity in recent years warrants further investigation. Furthermore, although negativity and anti-diversity attitudes on the internet are highly visible and often reported on, many fans enthusiastically celebrate the increase in media diversity (as the title quote “WE HAVE A BLACK GAY MAN ON A DRAGON” shows). Better understanding these reactions (positive and negative) can provide potent insights into consumers’ values and beliefs, while also informing the branding and marketing actions of businesses, organizations, and events striving for more diversity and representation.

This research sought to answer the following questions: How do TV serial fans in online social media spaces react to and debate diversity and the representation of minorities in media? How can those fan debates help consumer researchers better understand broader perceptions of diversity?

To do so, it examined the online fan discourses surrounding diversity and representation in the fantasy TV series *House of the Dragon* on Twitter/X and Tumblr. After applying ideal-type analysis to create a typology of discourses, four categories emerged: Vehement Enthusiasm, Critical Progressivism, Dismissive Questioning, and Purist Pushback.

These types of discourses contribute to our understanding of consumer views on diversity by highlighting the disruptions fans feel it introduces (viewed by some as positive, others as negative), but also how many see it as deeply instrumentalized and polarized within a larger sociopolitical context which has deeply politicized issues of representation.

Keywords : Fans, Netnography, Online discourses, Diversity, Representation, DEI

Research methods : Qualitative, Netnography

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List of abbreviations

ASOIAF: A Song of Ice and Fire (series of novels by GRRM, source material of GOT)

CCT: Consumer Culture Theory

DEI: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

GIF: Graphics Interchange Format

GOT: Game of Thrones (HBO tv series airing from 2010-2019, based on ASOIAF)

GRRM: George R. R. Martin (American fantasy and science fiction author. Most famous for ASOIAF)

HOTD: House of the Dragon (HBO tv series airing from 2022 to present, based on Fire & Blood, a prequel novel to ASOIAF by GRRM)

HBO: Home Box Office (American subscription TV network known for many successful TV series like The Sopranos, Sex and the City, Game of Thrones, and more)

LGBTQIA+ : This acronym designates lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex and asexual/aromantic identities. The “+” sign stands for any other gender identity or sexual orientation. Several versions of the acronym exist, this iteration was chosen to balance universal understanding of its meaning and inclusivity.

LOTR: Lord of the Rings

BIPOC: Black or Indigenous Person/People of Colour

TROP/ROP: The Rings of Power (Amazon original TV series airing from 2022 to present, largely based on appendices and supplementary material from several of J.R.R. Tolkien’s famous fantasy series “The Lord of the Rings” trilogy)

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Introduction

“WE HAVE A BLACK GAY MAN ON A DRAGON” exclaims a fan of the hit HBO production House of the Dragon (HOTD) in a tweet from the fall of 2022. Despite their personal jubilation over this, however, they know that this is sure to anger some less-than-progressive fans: “cry harder, bigoted dudebros” the publication continues.

Saying that the topic of diversity and representation in media has become highly controversial, polarized, and a near-constant feature of the news landscape risks sounding like a broken record nowadays. In recent years, several hit movies and TV series have found themselves at the center of frequently sensational online firestorms after casting non-white actors in key roles, featuring main female characters, or foregrounding LGBTQIA+ stories. A few recent examples include the Disney+ Star Wars series *Kenobi* (2023) and *The Acolyte* (2024), Disney’s live action *The Little Mermaid* (2023), and Amazon Prime’s *The Rings of Power* (TROP) (2022-ongoing). In the preceding decade, the newest installments of the Star Wars franchise (*The Force Awakens* in 2015, and *The Last Jedi* in 2017) also saw significant online pushback against its diverse leads and female hero (Rewriting Ripley, 2021). In certain cases, the backlash was so intense that actors reported receiving racist and hateful messages in large numbers (sometimes even death threats) (Dupre, 2020; Petit, 2018; Phillips, 2022), with some reporting they chose to delete their social media profiles in response to the hate (Petit, 2018).

While media fans have long been known to fiercely debate over competing interpretations of their favourite movies and TV series (Baym, 2000), the intensity of some of the backlash against media diversity in recent years warrants further investigation. It is also worth noting that, although negativity and anti-diversity attitudes on the internet are highly visible and often reported on, many fans enthusiastically celebrate the comparative increase in media diversity-as the title quote shows. While the critics and the hate are highly visible on social media-and often reported on by media outlets (Hills, 2018 ; Rewriting Ripley, 2021)-the story of media diversity and its impact on audiences also includes little girls of African heritage smiling giddily at a Little Mermaid who looks like them (Do Couto, 2022). On-screen diversity and representation is a topic of high importance, triggering strong emotional reactions (positive and negative) in media audiences today. Better understanding these reactions can provide potent insights into consumers’ values and

beliefs, while also informing the branding and marketing actions of businesses, organizations, and events striving for more diversity and representation.

In the field of marketing and consumer behaviour, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has received some attention in recent years. A lot of the available research, however, has tended to focus on marketplace discrimination (e.g. Bennet, Hill & Daddario, 2015; Galalae et al., 2023) or brands' promotion of DEI and embracing of activist causes, known as brand activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Spielmann, Dobscha & Shrum, 2023). Still, several researchers have also paid attention to how consumers react to and negotiate lacks of diversity or their own marginalization within some consumption subcultures like plus-size fashion (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) or video games (Drenten, Harrison & Pendarvis, 2023). When it comes to on-screen diversity, research has shown that media is highly influential in shaping viewers' real-world opinions of minority groups (Tukachinsky, Mastro & Yarchi, 2017). This power makes on-screen diversity far from a neutral question or social trend; who gets to be represented in media-and how-shapes real world interactions and sociopolitical issues. However, studies of audience perceptions of on-screen diversity tend to focus heavily on ethnic/racial diversity, to my knowledge not focusing as much on questions of sexual, gendered, and bodily differences. Thankfully, fan studies provides a body of research that addresses active audiences' reckoning with various types of diversity.

This research sought to answer the following questions: How do TV serial fans in online social media spaces react to and debate diversity and the representation of minorities in media? How can those fan debates help consumer researchers better understand broader perceptions of diversity?

To answer these questions, the research focused on discourses about on-screen diversity surrounding the first season of the HBO TV series *House of the Dragon* (HOTD), which aired in the late summer and fall of 2022. HOTD was selected as a focus topic as it enjoyed a sizeable viewership (Hailu, 2022) and has an already existing fanbase, since it is a prequel to the very successful "Game of Thrones" (2010-2019). It was also one of two highly publicized high-fantasy TV series airing in the fall of 2022 that made promises of offering a more diverse rendition of fantasy (the other was *The Rings of Power*). Overall, the first season of HOTD was better received and allowed the study of discussions surrounding several types of diversities-ethnic/racial, but also gendered, sexual, and bodily diversity.

A netnographic methodology (Kozinets, 2015; 2020) was adopted and online data was collected from X (formerly known as Twitter)¹ and Tumblr, with the bulk of the data collection taking place in July/August 2023. Textual, photographic, graphic and video data are all represented in the final dataset. To be included in the analysis, publications had to be public audience discussions about media diversity and HOTD-publications that discussed shows and movies other than HOTD were still included as long as HOTD remained part of the discussion. Immersive notes were kept alongside the archival data collection. The analysis process was highly iterative and began with deep immersion in the data and coding, followed by the application of ideal-type analysis and the creation of a typology (Gerhardt, 1994; Stapley, O’Keefe & Midgley, 2022). In the end, a typology featuring four exemplary discourses about diversity emerged as the most comprehensive representation of the phenomenon observed.

The findings of this research show that online fan discourses surrounding fantasy universes reveal many conflicting attitudes and tensions around issues of diversity and representation existing today. These tensions and conflicts are varied and relate to not one, but many types of diversity, although ethnic first and sexual diversity second are predominant in the observed discourse. These findings are presented here as a typology of discourses about on-screen diversity in HOTD: Vehement Enthusiasm (thinks on-screen diversity is necessary and appreciative of HOTD), Critical Progressivism (thinks on-screen diversity is necessary, but critical of HOTD), Dismissive Questioning (do not think on-screen diversity is necessary, but appreciative of HOTD), and Purist Pushback (do not think on-screen diversity is necessary and critical of HOTD). While they are structured around one specific TV series (HOTD) belonging to a specific genre (fantasy), I suggest that these ideal types could be more broadly applicable, and apt to describe the discourses of fans of media of different genres, but also some key cultural moments where broader audiences express themselves as well (albeit probably with variations, or with certain discourses being more or less dominant depending on the context).

The following chapters will be structured as follows. First, chapter 1 will provide a review of the existing literature on diversity and representation in marketing with a focus on CCT, as well as research on on-screen diversity, primarily drawn from cultural and media studies. Next, it will also

¹ In order to render the rest of the text lighter, X is hereafter referred to Twitter/X.

examine existing literature on fans and fan debates. Second, chapter 2 will present the context of the research and its netnographic methodology. Chapter 3 will cover the findings, which broadly demonstrate that fan reactions to the diversity featured in HOTD can be plotted along two axes, illustrating four types of perceptions of on-screen diversity and representation. These four types of discourse reacting to on-screen diversity and representation emanate from fan discourse largely focused on HOTD. However, fans frequently explore questions pertaining to the fantasy genre more broadly, other genres like science-fiction, and real-world implications and applications of more diversity and representation in media. Finally, Chapter 4 will provide a discussion of the findings, which includes their theoretical and managerial implications. Limitations will also be detailed in this chapter, and avenues for further research will be suggested.

Chapter 1

Literature review

This research seeks to better understand online fan discourses on diversity and representation in media and what those discourses can teach consumer researchers about broader perceptions of diversity and representation today. Therefore, the conceptual background brings together the topics of diversity and representation, and media fandom.

Importantly, this research adopts a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) approach. CCT is a branch of marketing and consumer research defined as “an interdisciplinary research tradition that has advanced knowledge about consumer culture (in all its heterogeneous manifestations) and generated empirically grounded findings and theoretical innovations that are relevant to a broad constituency in the base social science disciplines, public policy arenas, and managerial sectors.” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005: 869) Due to the interdisciplinary nature of CCT, while this research is ultimately focused on marketing and consumer research, it will be helpful to draw on literature from the fields of media studies and the social sciences more broadly.

First, we will review the existing research about diversity and representation in CCT, but also draw relevant knowledge from media, sociology, and cultural studies more broadly. Second, we will examine current knowledge about fans, fandoms and their discourses. Particular attention will be paid to specifically online fandom, discourses, and phenomena documented in CCT but also media studies scholarship.

1.1. Diversity and representation

In the context of this research, diversity and representation should be understood to work together to express first the presence of more people of varying ethnicities, sexual orientations, genders or physical and mental abilities in media (diversity). Second, they also refer to the *way* those diverse individuals are depicted on-screen (representation). This is why, to give a concrete example, a fan could speak of “good representation” or “bad representation” (whereas “bad diversity” or “good diversity” might be a less common formulation, at least in English). Ultimately, representation of more marginalized groups on screen translates to an increase in diversity, which is why the concepts are frequently found together in fan discussions.

DEI, “diversity, and “representation” are all terms with debated meanings and interpretations. Arsel, Crockett and Scott (2021) offer the following definition for DEI and its components:

“[...] diversity refers broadly to real or perceived physical or socio-cultural differences attributed to people and the representation of these differences in research, market spaces, and organizations. Equity refers to fairness in the treatment of people in terms of both opportunity and outcome. Inclusion refers to creating a culture that fosters belonging and incorporation of diverse groups and is usually operationalized as opposition to exclusion or marginalization. Taken together, DEI is typically accompanied by an axiological orientation toward procedural and distributive justice in organizations and institutions.” (920)

The term DEI, however, makes few appearances in the dataset of this research. Arsel, Crockett and Scott’s definition of diversity as “real or perceived physical or socio-cultural differences attributed to people” (ibid.) proves adequate for the present research, and is particularly apt due to its broad applicability-not being restricted to ethnic or racial diversity. This definition, while helpful, does not define representation precisely. However, the term “representation” is used emically in internet discussions, alongside “diversity”. A crucial difference between both terms is that “representation” may be used in debates about what ought to be represented, while “diversity” quantifies the “representation ” (Kozinets, Cavusoglu & Belk, 2024).

1.1.1. Diversity in consumer and marketing research

Questions relating to diversity, representation, equity and inclusion have all received attention from consumer researchers in the past, and especially recently as the topic “has become ubiquitous in public and academic discourse.” (Arsel, Crockett & Scott, 2021 : 920) For the purposes of this research, it is possible to divide the existing knowledge in two streams: research that focuses on consumer and marketplace diversity (how consumers’ diverse experiences and differences shape their consumption experiences), and research that focuses on consumer reactions to diversity and representation and its impact on them and the broader culture. That is, either research focuses on the diversity of consumers-how they may be underserved, stigmatized or vulnerable, for example, within the current state of market offerings-or on how consumers perceive diversity and representation as a part of the marketplace and culture, extending into how diversity and

representation may be an agent of change. To my knowledge, much of the research into diversity currently falls in the first category, with the second receiving some attention in recent years, but with still many avenues left unexplored.

Research about diverse consumers and the marketplace has explored a plethora of topics. An important part of the marketing and consumer behaviour research addressing issues of diversity focuses heavily on marketplace racism and discrimination, like how consumers who belong to racial or ethnic minorities are poorly treated by financial service providers compared to their white counterparts (Bone, Christensen and Williams, 2014) or how socio-economic inequalities drive differences in health insurance or long-term care decisions later in life (Mittal & Griskevicius, 2016; Mittal, Griskevicius & Haws, 2020). In fact, a recent issue of JACR (2023) was dedicated to the topic of marketplace racism and discrimination, showing that, while it may have been overlooked in earlier research (Bennett, Hill, & Daddario, 2015), marketplace and consumer discrimination is growing in importance in consumer research. Researchers have also examined how consumers who belong to various minority groups carve out identities through consumption choices, like how gay male consumers use consumption experiences to define their sense of community belonging (Kates, 2002; 2004), or how Mexican immigrants to the United States use consumption as an acculturation tool (Penaloza, 1994). Some research has also paid attention to consumers who are marginalized within a specific niche culture of consumption, like “Fatshionistas,” consumers who do not fit within the offering of mainstream fashion due to their plus-sized status, recognize their own lack of representation within the fashion industry and demand change (Scaraboto & Fischer 2013), or female gamers facing gatekeeping and remaining rigid gendered boundaries (Drenten, Harrison & Pendarvis, 2023).

While it is obvious that, in certain cases, consumers’ own diverse identities may play a part in their perception of and reactions to diversity and representation, these reactions demand additional study in of themselves. The diversity and representation these consumers are responding to can be understood to emanate primarily from brands *reacting* to the more visible diversity of consumers by positioning themselves in support of communities or causes. However, studies have demonstrated that perceived legitimacy plays a key role in consumers evaluations of such stances from brands: Kates (2004) showed that brands are treated differently by gay male consumers depending on if they consider the brand a true supporter of their community or not, and Spielmann,

Dobscha and Shrum (2023) showed that “consumers (and investors) do make assessments about allyship behavior by brands and are discerning enough to notice the difference between true and performative tactics” (10), concluding that “brands have little to gain from acting as performative allies, and even less so toward the communities most affected by social injustice.” Kozinets, Cavusoglu & Belk (2024), for their part, examined Mattel’s introduction of diverse Barbie dolls (such as Barbies in wheelchairs, with prosthetics, with a variety of skin tones or hair textures, and more) and consumer reactions to the initiative, likewise showing that consumers may express skepticism towards the true commitment to inclusivity of brands advertising their diversity and representation when they perceive it to be primarily profit-motivated.

These perceptions of inauthenticity are also relevant in the study of “woke-washing,” which does intersect with questions of consumer perceptions of diversity and representation. Woke washing occurs when a brand “[uses] social activism marketing to position their [brand] in the marketplace” but their “practices may not clearly align with their messaging.” (Vrendenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2018: par.12-3) While not all woke washing or brand activism is necessarily related to issues of diversity and representation (Vrendenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020), support for minorities and fighting oppression remain important parts of brand activism efforts. While the question of the authenticity-or lack thereof-of brand activism is important to keep in mind, it remains primarily focused on brands’ perspectives, rather than consumers’ discourses and opinions.

1.1.2. On-screen diversity

The importance of meaningful diverse casting and the avoidance of racial stereotypes in mass media is documented (Tukachinsky, Mastro & Yarchi, 2017; Blumer, 1958). Indeed, as Blumer states, it is through “public media” that “individuals who are accepted as the spokesmen of a racial group characterize publicly another racial group” (1958: 3-4). Furthermore, the idea of “dominant/subordinate” racial groups and ones’ identification to them is socially constructed (1958: 3-4). It follows that casting – and writing - choices in the most popular series on television have the potential to meaningfully impact those categories of definition and identification, participating in the social creation of racial prejudice – or, maybe, in its undoing.

According to Tukachinsky, Mastro and Yarchi, “much is known about negative consequences of exposure to ethnic/racial stereotypes (...) on white audiences.” (2017: 538) Furthermore, previous research has also demonstrated that on-screen representation of racial minorities still lags behind their statistical occurrence in the population of the United States. There also remains a high occurrence of stereotypical characters and tropes in what representation does exist (538). Some of the documented consequences in previous scholarship go as far as showing that even social policy support can be influenced by the exposure of white Americans to racial stereotypes (541).

Therefore, the lack of appropriately diverse representation and the little that exists in North American media at this time often relies on stereotypes. This can have social consequences on the real world, influencing perceptions of minority groups and public policy. One of Hollywood’s solutions to the lack of diversity on screens is the practice of “blindcasting” or “colourblind casting” (both terms essentially referring to the same practice, they will be used interchangeably moving forward).

Blindcasting can be defined broadly as the practice of not assigning a race to characters during the writing of the script or in casting calls, effectively not assuming the race of any of the characters prior to auditioning actors for the roles (Warner, 2015: 631 & 636). In theory, colourblind casting is supposed to create additional opportunities for BIPOC actors. In practice, it has been criticized for falling short of its goals.

In her discussion of the racial politics surrounding the popular show “Grey’s Anatomy”, Warner positions blindcasting as “race neutralization as a solution to racial inequity” (2015: 633). She traces its origin to a 1999 threat of boycott of the big television networks by the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and NALIP (National Association of Latino Independent Producers), who argued there was too little racial diversity in their shows – this was in reaction to an almost if not entirely white cast lineup for the fall of 1999. In her view, networks popularized the practice of blindcasting to “make casts more racially diverse without having to acknowledge difference” (636).

Much of Warner’s criticism of entirely colourblind casting come from a critical point of view: she argues the practice sidesteps much needed conversations about race and racism in media, and that it makes on-screen diversity a “feel-good” tool simply meant to elicit positive sentiments towards

the progress of society through “corporate multiculturalism” (639). She also argues that it often inadvertently places characters of colour in stereotyped roles by ignoring subtext present in the relationships and arcs of the characters (640). Therefore, entirely colourblind casting could cause more harm than good according to Warner. Indeed, placing the relatively few people of colour who do appear on screens in more stereotyped roles would simply contribute to the real societal issues identified previously.

However, Warner’s focus on the realistic (although melodramatic) world of “Grey’s Anatomy” raises these issues in the context of characters who should very much themselves care about race to some degree, yet exchange dialogue that barely every acknowledges it. Her focus on the nearly completely blindcast “Grey’s Anatomy” does not allow for a more nuanced conversation either. Are there any roles that can indeed be blindcast without stereotyping? Could a more careful and text-aware version of the practice be beneficial to the goal of increasing on-screen representation of minorities?

As King and colleagues remark, “messages perceived are just as important as the messages Hollywood desires to transmit” (2021: 346). In a study published in 2021, they determined four factors or types of audience attitudes to diversity in movies. Their four factors, on a spectrum of most colourblind to most actively anti-racist are: “storyline devotees”, “tolerant learners”, “balanced critics” and “grounded advocates” (King et. al., 2021: 345).

This framework is helpful in contextualizing how important diverse casts are to different types of audience members. Simply put, storyline devotees do not express any level of preference for diverse or non diverse casts; they “do not see race” and only care about the quality of the story. Tolerant learners do not consider diversity on screen to be strictly necessary except in cases where a story focuses on racial issues; they believe that stories that are explicitly about these issues also have a teaching potential for viewers. Balanced critics see a diversity issue in the movie industry, but acknowledge that good representations of characters of colour do exist. They also see stereotypical portrayals of people of colour negatively. Finally, the grounded advocates consider that it is absolutely necessary to have diversity on screens and that it be positive. Despite this, they do not believe in the power of on-screen diversity to affect people’s attitudes. (345)

Importantly, King and colleagues acknowledge that their study did not take into account actively racist viewers who would have a problem with any diversity on screen (Bodroghkozy, 1992). As Warner points out, even a show that is “designed to be so racially neutral as not to offend audiences, hostile viewers still [feel] there [is] too much black on their television screens” (2015: 634). Here, Warner refers to an older era of television – from the 1970s to the 1990s – but such attitudes still exist today (as mentioned in the introduction, several BIPOC actors involved in recent movies and TV shows making efforts towards diversity received hateful messages and even death threats) warranting serious investigations not only into attitudes that are neutral to favourable to diversity, but those that are more critical as well.

As seen in the preceding paragraphs, most of the research on on-screen diversity has focused on ethnic/racial diversity. Some studies have examined the question of casting straight and cisgender actors in gay or transgender roles (e.g. Cover, 2022; Martin, 2018), but they remain scarce.

In conclusion, while the topics of diversity and representation have received scholarly attention in the past and are increasingly studied in consumer research, a thorough investigation of audience and media consumer attitudes towards on-screen diversity (conceptualized as broader than simple ethnic diversity) remains warranted. In addition, marketplace diversity has largely been studied in the context of discrimination of diverse consumers, as opposed to consumer views on diversity. Brand activism promoting diversity and representation or support for social causes related to minorities is also the subject of research, but mostly focuses on the brands’ perspectives and desired messaging. On the other hand, research in media studies and sociology, for example, has engaged with consumer perceptions of on-screen diversity, providing at least one perspective into the topic. That said, ethnic and racial diversity have historically been the focus of such studies, leaving aside other relevant diversities like bodily diversity, gender diversity and sexual diversity, to name only a few. Thankfully, major media phenomena with large and active audiences abound and, in recent years, have triggered rich discourses around on-screen diversity that can enrich the scholarly understanding of the topic.

1.2. Fans and fandom

In the opening chapters of his seminal book *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins traces the etymology of the term back to “fanatics”, crazed followers of a strange and alien religion. Sports enthusiast

and female theatregoers in the late 19th century are next identified as the first “fans” in the shortened form of the word (1992: 12).

Several definitions exist for “fans.” For the purpose of this research, it is the status of fans as a “particularly active and vocal community of consumers” (Jenkins, 1992 : 27) or “the most visible and identifiable of audiences (Lewis, 1992:1) which forms the basis of the relevant definition. Early studies of fans often focused on the deviant tendencies of “para-social interaction” and the fan as an insane victim of modernity and unhealthily obsessed with low-brow culture (Jenson 1992). Work like that of Jenkins, Fiske, and Hills later focused on fans’ interpretative and discursive practices, creative pursuits, and powerful community ties (e.g. Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Hills, 2002), in effect revealing the active and productive sides of fandom which lend it a distinctly folkloric quality (Jenkins, 2006a). In essence, fans, far from passively absorbing mass media, examine it, analyze it, discuss it, expand it, and re-interpret it to suit their preferences and needs, and make these stories their own in a way not unlike that of pre-commercial cultural consumption, where crafts and entertainment were communally produced and enjoyed based on existing, yet always re-invented, culturally significant narratives and practices (Jenkins, 2006a).

While fans’ interpretative practices certainly pre-date the internet, the web has absolutely made fandom more visible and less marginal (Jenkins, 2006b). One important way in which this change has occurred is in enabling varying levels of commitment to and participation in fandom (Baym, 2000; Jenkins, Ito & boyd, 2016); in terms of time and monetary commitment, chiming in in online debates or publishing fan art from the comfort of one’s home is a far cry from driving over to meet-ups or conventions every weekend, for example. In turn, the spread of fandom from its margins of cultural consumption has contributed to the development of the internet’s own culture (Jenkins, 2006a): “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006a; Jenkins, Ito & boyd, 2016) owes a great deal to fandom and its influence on the development of internet culture. Jenkins does-wisely-warn against the generalization of fan discourses, practices and attitudes to broader audiences (Jenkins, 1992). However, the spread of fan cultures and their heightened visibility due to the internet alters the importance of this warning. While it is true that not every person who watches a show for entertainment should be considered a fan, active and engaged audience members-which is one of the hallmarks of fandom-are visible all over the internet (Jenkins, 2006a). These visible discourses are apt to increase knowledge, even if only a minority of any given audience is in fact visibly

active. Fans who are active in internet discourse do represent a “vocal extreme,” akin to other highly motivated “lead users,” whose study has a proven power to give researchers a window to identify future patterns of consumer culture (Kozinets, 2024).

1.2.1. Fandom, “struggles for meaning,” and diversity

At the core of what Henry Jenkins terms “media fandom” – to distinguish it from theatre, literature, sports or music fandom, to name just a few examples - (1992: 1) there exists a tension that has only grown with fandom’s increasingly “mainstream” status. Through one lens, fandom is about inclusion, community and the coming together of misfits, weirdos and marginalized folks around a media property for which they share a passion and in which they find refuge (Jenkins, 1992: Kozinets, 2001); through another, fandom is deeply exclusionary and hierarchical, with some fans using knowledge to construct a superior status to others and even explicitly policing discourses (Jenkins, 2006b), or resisting the inclusion of certain types of fans or participants (Hills, 2018).

Fan studies have examined a number of aspects of fandom and its continued cultural relevance. Topics of note include how fandoms have attracted the marginalized since the days of Star Trek (Kozinets, 2001); how fandom and its fictional texts take on the characteristics of a myth or quasi-religion (ibid.); tensions between fans and anti or non-fans (Gray, 2003), as well as how fandom can become anti-fandom (Garner, 2018). Tensions over “canon” - “which elements of a particular storyworld are ‘genuine’ or ‘authentic’” (3) - and other “struggles for meaning” (Scodari, 2007:49) are another already established phenomena in fandoms and fan studies. These struggles further escalate when older generations of fans are confronted with new interpretations by younger fans, or when other power dynamics like gender or race are introduced into the mix. Fans are also active groups: in certain circumstances, fan activism has advocated for more representation on their favourite programs (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995) or to bring a beloved show back from the brink of cancellation (Jenkins, 1992).

The fan as prosumer (Seymour, 2018) or “textual poacher” (Jenkins, 1992) is an aspect of fandom that has attracted a lot of attention in fan studies, from Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* to some of the most recent scholarship. Far from being content with simply consuming the object of their fandom, fans have long engaged in the creation of alternative material related to their fandom (video edits, zines, fanfiction) (Jenkins 2006b; Jenkins, 1992; Freund, 2018). Fan creations, from funny

animated images (“GIFS”) to hardcore slash fanfiction, are abundant on the internet. Fan creations are additionally interesting for their potential to trigger struggles for meaning between fans by introducing potential contradictions to the accepted canon or simply theories and interpretations that are not unanimously appreciated by the fandom (Jenkins, 1992). The way in which fans may use their creations in order to see themselves represented in the object of their fandom is also a fascinating topic. LGBTQIA+ fans may write “slash” fanfiction featuring two characters who do not experience same-sex attraction in “canon” in a homosexual relationship (Jenkins, 1992; Tosenberger, 2008).² Fewer studies have paid attention to the equally important practice of “racebending” in fanart, where fanartists change the race of a – often white – character to feel themselves (or others) represented in the universe that character comes from (Seymour, 2018). Fans are therefore documented, throughout the history of this phenomena, as active audiences often capable and willing to campaign for what they want to see in media, but also to create their own parallel theories and art forms to introduce representation for themselves where it might be lacking.

Audience engagement with cross and trans-media storytelling properties is also relevant to the knowledge and expert status discussion (Harvey, 2015). The adaptation of beloved novels, or the expansion of movie universes into other media (video games, radio play and many others) can ignite quite a bit of fan discourse and “struggles for meaning”. This effect is only increased when the fans’ own memories of the events and characters presented in the universes they know and love conflict or seem to conflict with new adaptations of the narrative. Highly dedicated fanbases have always had strong opinions about the universes and characters they care about. Plus, the fantasy and science-fiction genres that gave birth to contemporary fan culture can be especially prone to this phenomenon, due to the creative sandbox they offer viewers and fans to let their own imaginations run wild (Stephan, 2016). If fans bicker over interpretations of a TV series, things can only get more complicated if that TV series is itself an adaptation of a book.

Furthermore, fan studies have also examined how fans participate in the creation of knowledge: how it is created, disseminated and how it bestows status on certain fans (Jenkins, 2006b), but also how the social capital that comes with active participation in fandom gives some fans heightened

² This is not the only reason people write slash fiction, and not all of it is written by gay men. Nevertheless, it often answers some desire to see alternatives to compulsory heterosexuality represented.

influence and authority (Chin, 2018). Fans have become “important contributors to the formation of collective belief”, “consecrating agents” in the Bourdieusian sense (Shefrin, 2004: 269). Speculation, theories and exchange are at the core of internet fan discourse and have been since fans from around the world joined in communities of speculation and mystery-solving surrounding their favourite media properties (Jenkins, 2006b). Furthermore, these questions of status, knowledge and « canon » have led to tensions only exacerbated by the competing interpretations put forward by certain groups of fans, as they clash with interpretations made by others. This is where questions of diversity, “canon”, knowledge communities and power conferred through this knowledge and involvement have intersected with questions of identity and diversity in fan discourses and studies; gay Star Trek fans advocating for more representation (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995), or creating bisexual Kirk x Spock fanfiction (Jenkins, 1992) came at odds with anyone who regarded the canon Star Trek narrative as inherently straight or in no need of additional gender or sexual diversity. Certain interpretations are “acceptable” and others are not, with fan interpretations or alternative stories almost always subordinated to the canon in the minds of fans.

It is therefore impossible to fully separate hierarchies and power relations from fans’ “struggles for meaning.” In the context of diversity and representation in mass entertainment, those power struggles and existing hierarchies are particularly relevant; if fans are consecrating agents, the media that they consecrate, especially what that media reflects of a society or its ideals, matters greatly. Conversely, what they may refuse to consecrate-what elements of a story they may reject as inauthentic or against “canon”-matters just as much. In an era of media with much polarizing discussion about the place of diversity and representation, what may come to be rejected as inauthentic by fans can very well be diversity itself. That said, the history of fandom is ripe with stories of radical demands for inclusion as well as exclusionary movements.

Topics related to diversity have been specifically covered by fan studies: how LGBTQIA+ fans may organize to pressure studios for more representation (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995; Jenkins, 2006b); how fandom – rather than striving for inclusivity – can use discursive rules to purposefully re-assert the whiteness of the material and their own (Young, 2014); how female fans may construct a different relationship with fandom or the objects of their fandom than male fans - particularly in studies of sports fandom - (Pope, 2013; Fenton, 2021) and how north-American fans of Japanese media (“otaku”) participate in the diffusion of that culture - but also flirt with its

appropriation (Jenkins 2006b; Larsen, 2018). The practice of “Queerbaiting” – when characters in a work of fiction are ambiguously written as queer or straight to attract LGBTQ2+ audiences without offending more conservative viewers with an explicitly LGBTQIA+ character – and how queer fans interpret texts and metatexts has also been the subject of attention (Ng, 2017). Some research has also specifically dealt with fan reactions to increased diversity in popular fantasy or science-fiction narratives, often focusing on negative backlash and toxic practices (Proctor, 2018; Proctor & Kies, 2018). It remains important to acknowledge that much of media fandom has focused and continues to focus on primarily white and western media properties. More importantly, fan studies have largely treated fandom as predominantly “colourblind” or even simply white as default (Stanfill, 2018: 309) and “currently [do] not have a robust engagement with race.” (ibid: 305)

In conclusion, fans and their discursive practices form a useful theoretical lens through which to examine consumer reactions to diversity. Indeed, fans constitute particularly active audiences which may help shed light on the topic. Fans may be discussing fictional narratives and characters, reality often seeps through, making their discourses revelatory of deeper truths and values (Baym, 2000).

1.3. Research gap

The current state on the research on diversity in the marketplace, as well as consumer reactions and perceptions towards diversity and representation, warrants further investigation. Furthermore, how fans specifically discuss diversity in their favourite shows and movies has also been investigated, but requires more in-depth and dedicated study. Upon reviewing the research that is available in both fields, it becomes apparent that a large part of it has focused on discrimination and dealing with lacks diversity and representation (whether focusing on underserved consumers, or media that features characters who are predominantly white, heterosexual and cisgender), but also on outwardly racist or sexist rhetoric meant to preclude further diversity and inclusion in certain fandom and media spaces (such as the gaming industry, or the fantasy genre). While there is some research on brands taking a stand for diversity, equity and inclusion or social movements in support of marginalized consumers, it often focuses on brand activism, “woke washing,” and brand authenticity being maintained or disturbed. Many studies have also focused on one type of diversity at a time, with ethnic and racial diversity receiving the bulk of this attention. Thorough

literature reviews and research agendas (Arsel, Crockett & Scott, 2021; Galalae et al., 2023) dedicated to marketplace DEI, racism, and discrimination are however helpful in bridging these gaps between research about different diversities, touching on topics of religious, sexual, gendered, and bodily diversity, to name only a few.

Therefore, this research will seek to answer the following questions: How do TV fans in online social media spaces react to and debate diversity and the representation of minorities in media? How can those fan debates help consumer researchers better understand broader perceptions of diversity and representation?

Chapter 2 Methodology

The upcoming chapter will present the methodology adopted in order to study online fan discourses surrounding diversity in media and what we can learn from these discourses. First, the particular context of the study will be examined in more detail. Indeed, this research focuses on discourses surrounding fantasy media, more precisely on the highly successful and popular HBO production *House of the Dragon* (“HOTD”) (2022-ongoing). We will therefore trace a portrait of the specificities of the fantasy genre, which is found in literature, movies, TV, video games and more, as well as what those specificities may mean for discourses about diversity and representation. We will also examine the case of HOTD and the selection criteria which led to the choice of this one TV series as a topic. Next, we will examine the methodology which guided this research, namely netnography (Kozinets, 2015). The relevance of the research methodology to answer the specific questions posed in this research will also be justified. Finally, we will examine in detail the data collection and analysis process and methods.

2.1. Context

2.1.1. Fantasy and imaginary worlds

Fantasy is mainly studied as a literary genre. However, since Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, it has been found in books, video games, movies, TV series, in short, all across mediums. It has enjoyed increasing popularity since the 1970s, especially helped along by Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* award-winning trilogy of movies (2001-2003) and the hit TV adaptation of *Game of Thrones* produced by HBO (2010-2019) (Stephan, 2016: 3-4).

According to Matthias Stephan, “fantasy literature is fiction that offers the reader a world estranged from their own, separated by nova that are supernatural or otherwise consistent with the marvelous, and which has as its dominant tone a sense of wonder” (Stephan, 2016: 3).

He further argues that one of fantasy’s defining features is the level of estrangement possible from our own world. This is thanks to the genre’s worldbuilding, and loose universe rules enabled by magical explanations. It also has an overarching sense of wonder and enchantment which, unlike in horror, lets the reader or viewer know that everything will be alright in the end (ibid.). Combined

with an existing meta-text – much of it inherited as conventions from Tolkien, themselves borrowed from old Norse and Anglo-Saxon myth – it provides “the possibility of exploring alternatives in the ‘safe’ environment of fiction” (ibid. 14). Stephan argues that, despite – or precisely because of – its difference with our real world, it is a particularly apt universe in which to “discuss issues of race, gender, sex, politics which are critical in our own contemporary society” (ibid. 9).

A potent example of this is Andrzej Sapkowski’s *The Witcher* book series – since adapted into popular video games and Netflix show (Gawroński and Bajorek, 2020). In its universe, much of the human population expresses overt and violent racism towards the elven and sometimes dwarven populations of their lands, engaging in pogroms and deportations as war tears their lands apart and they search for scapegoats to explain their suffering. All of this takes place in the background of the heroes’ adventure to defeat an evil invader. These atrocities sadly find their inspirations in tragedies which have taken place in our real world’s history (forced displacements of indigenous populations under colonialism, or antisemitic pogroms, for example). Fantasy may take place in a world different from our own, but it remains at least a partial reflection of the guilts, fears, nostalgias and hopes of the real socio-political contexts in which their creators first manifested them.

Despite its differences with the related genre of science-fiction, fantasy shares with its older cousin a fundamental idea: fantasy and science-fiction both utilize worlds that are “other” to our own to hold a mirror up to our current society. Science-fiction generally does so by projecting the reader into possible futures, while fantasy often represents a fictional past. Both genres ask readers (and viewers) questions that relate to their current world, or even hold a mirror up to reflect the flaws – or successes – of their time back to them; *Star Trek*, for example, airing in the years following the American Civil Rights movement (the original *Star Trek* series aired from 1966-1969, while the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts passed in 1964 and 1965 respectively in the United States), asked viewers to imagine a future where a completely integrated space agency that had men and women working alongside each other brought humanity to “boldly go where no one has gone before.” Just like it is impossible to separate *Star Trek*’s integrated Starfleet from the context in which the show was first written, it is impossible to separate some creative choices made in fantasy and science-fiction works from their larger historical contexts.

That is not to say that a writer coming up with a story that takes place in an imagined past that is sexist, racist and violent, automatically idealizes those aspects of that past. Both *Game of Thrones* and *HOTD* take place in such a universe, and female, queer or otherwise “different” – from the white, cis, heterosexual norm - characters frequently suffer because of the cruelty and close-mindedness of their peers. Their stories are ones of adversity, sometimes seeing them transcend these restrictions and succeed, and sometimes showing how unjust structures eventually grind down and crush the most willing and determined when they step out of the place the prejudices of their time define for them. How fans react to these stories and relate them to the unjust structures that still exist today – how some fans see those structures and whether they even still exist or not – can yield potent insights into how diversity, efforts towards equality and the injustices that still exist in our world are perceived by modern audiences.

2.1.2. House of the Dragon

The first season of the HBO television series *House of the Dragon* was chosen as the topic of fan discussion of interest for this research for several reasons. First, its viewership was sizeable (Hailu, 2022). As a *Game of Thrones* (2010-2019) prequel, it also enjoyed an active fanbase before it aired, as well as a large amount of book and TV lore for fans to draw upon in their discussions.

HOTD tells the story of a succession crisis triggered by the social impossibility represented by a woman taking the throne of the fictional kingdom of Westeros. The fratricide crisis begins when king Viserys II dies, leaving his eldest daughter Rhaenyra and her younger half-brother Aegon II as the two potential legitimate heirs, tearing the realm apart between oaths of loyalty sworn years earlier to the elder princess, and the comforting stability of a male line of succession assured by her half brother in a heavily patriarchal society inspired by medieval England (with dragons).

The television series, like its highly successful predecessor *Game of Thrones*, is produced by HBO based on books written by George R. R. Martin (GRRM). Martin’s books’ lore and worldbuilding are famously extensive, and often inspired by real-world historical events. *Game of Thrones*, for example, draws heavily on the events of the British “War of the Roses” (1455-1487), with Martin even choosing names reminiscent of the historical belligerents as the names of some of the first two main factions in his popular series (York/Stark; Lancaster/Lannister) (BBC 4, n.d.).

GRRM's books and the TV series inspired by them have faced criticism in the past; his fantasy world may have dragons and magic, but it leans decidedly darker than the hopeful and eventually triumphant "good vs. evil" narrative that is more typically associated with fantasy. Westeros and its neighboring fictional lands are a brutal world where slavery, sexual violence, colonization, frightful diseases, and incest abound (in addition to imaginary horrible things like ice zombies and evil witches). Knights are not always virtuous and chivalrous heroes. In fact, many of Martin's ostensible knights in shining armour and fairy-tale princes turn out to be child murderers, rapists, spoiled sadistic brats, or generally morally corrupt individuals, while the truly honourable characters often become victims of the adage "no good deed goes unpunished." This is true both in *Game of Thrones* and *HOTD*. It is obviously not the purpose of this research to dissect GRRM's writing or intentions, but it is worth noting that he seems interested in creating a fantasy world which reflects the inequities of the past, but also subverts some expected tropes and shows its most disempowered characters-women with no agency of their own in a patriarchal nobility, or disabled individuals in a world where they are seen as deformed or burdens, for example-fighting tooth and nail to gain and retain power, agency, happiness, or simply their life. Some of these characters succeed, and some fail, sometimes through ability, merit, or goodness, and sometimes through murder, cruelty, or some unfair advantage by virtue of their family connections. Through this, GRRM often incorporates in the world of Westeros questions about sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism, and countless forms of discrimination which resonate in our contemporary world and ignite debates not only about the show or the books themselves, but what these themes and questions mean for the real world as well.

That said, *ASOIAF* and its TV adaptation have both received criticisms for appearing to especially revel in depicting sexual and gendered violence against its female characters, under the guise of showing a "realistic" depiction of a medieval world (Orr, 2015). GRRM has also received-and responded-to criticism asserting that his writing is deeply Eurocentric and lacks of diversity in its characters (Martin, 2013). That said, it is clear from the decades of discourse about his books that GRRM's expansive creation is a site of discussion and debate about issues of diversity and representation in itself.

HOTD's first season (August-October 2022) produced strong and varied reactions around diversity, since HBO cast several Asian and Black actors in key roles, featured gay characters, and

a non-binary actor as the main lead (the character they play, however, is a woman). It also aired roughly at the same time as another major TV series based on a highly popular fantasy universe: Amazon's production of *The Rings of Power*, (TROP) loosely based on appendices of J.R.R. Tolkien's famous books. TROP also elected to cast several actors of colour in main roles, and featured a female main character. More broadly, online discourses surrounding diversity and representation in TV, movies and video games have garnered much attention in recent years. Beyond simple debate, incidents of hate or threatening messages being sent to actors, video game companies, writers (in short, the people seen as responsible for a push for diversity by people who are absolutely anti-media diversity) have also occurred (Dupre, 2020; Ore, 2024). Some of the TROP actors were the targets of such messages, for example (Phillips, 2022). While this research is not investigating private messages or primarily hateful rhetoric, these extreme cases do speak to the importance of studying debates about diversity and representation.

Likely due to their common fantasy genre, similar airing schedules, and diverse casts, HOTT and TROP were heavily intertwined and compared to each other in online discourses. As will become manifest in the findings chapter later on, many discourses on HOTT nearly inevitably mention TROP as well, so even with HOTT being the guiding topic of this research, comparisons to TROP are a common discursive resource employed by audience members which we cannot ignore. It is worth mentioning that earlier versions of this research planned to include discourses about the diversity in TROP on their own merit as well, in order to compare and contrast discourse about the two TV series. However, TROP was ultimately not retained as a focus topic due to time constraints, but also because a focus on HOTT still allowed viable comparison with TROP discourse-as mentioned above-where relevant. Because the discourses were so deeply entwined, a certain redundancy was observed.

Finally, the types of reactions and discourses expected to be found were also taken into account: indeed, based on the primary investigator's own prior knowledge of the discourses being studied, it was expected that discourses around TROP would likely skew much more negative-or defensive-while the discussion around HOTT seemed more nuanced and, therefore, more apt to represent a wide range of perspectives and discursive practices in discussing and debating on-screen diversity and representation. While, as acknowledged earlier, hateful messages and discourses are an undeniable part of the social media landscape surrounding advances of diversity in media, the goal

of this research was to provide a broader view than would be granted by focusing solely on negative discourses-as opposed to including them in a range of possibilities. HOTD also featured a wider range of diversities or potential related topics fans could discuss. While TROP had Black, Polynesian and Asian actors and a female main character, it did not feature any LGBTQIA+ characters, and most of the discourse seemed very focused on ethnic diversity. HOTD, on the other hand, also opened the door to discussions of non-binarity, homosexuality or bisexuality, as well as bodily diversity. In the end, HOTD was evaluated to provide a wider range of diversities for fans to discuss, as well as richer and more varied expressions of opinions and debates. It was therefore selected as the focus of the research, but discourses that included mentions to TROP or other media were retained if HOTD was also discussed.

2.2. Research method: non-interactive netnography

This research employed netnography as its guiding methodology. Netnography is a qualitative research method derived from ethnography and cultural anthropology (Kozinets, 1998) which seeks to “[obtain] cultural understandings of human experience from online social interaction and content, and [represent] them as a form of research” (Kozinets, 2015: 18).

Netnography and online ethnography have been used to study online communities of practice (e.g. Baym, 2000; Gannon & Prothero, 2018), fans (e.g. Kozinets, 1997; 2001; Obiegbu et al., 2019), and a plethora of other internet phenomena, communities, sites, and topics in the past quarter century. The method has proven its effectiveness for understanding current topics, emerging trends, and future developments, especially when it comes to lead users (Kozinets, 2024).

It is important to distinguish between data site and topic when discussing the phenomenon studied in a netnography. In the case of this research, a topic (HOTD) was studied on two data sites, Twitter/X and Tumblr. These two social media platforms were selected for a number of reasons. First, both platforms are full of online fan discourse, about the topic at hand and in general (Dyner & Ross, 2022; Klink et al., 2020). Additionally, due to their different affordances, cultures, and user demographics, Twitter/X and Tumblr provide access to more varied points of view than either could provide alone. Twitter/X’s userbase is mostly male (60.9% of users over 18) (Statista 2024a) and attracts users of all ages, with a large minority (36.6%) of 25-34 year olds (Statista 2024b). Meanwhile, Tumblr is dominated by Gen Z (ranging from 12 to 27 years old at the time of

publication, although exact cutoff dates for Generation Z are widely debated) at 48% of active users (Tumblr, n.d.). Tumblr also has a fairly even split between its female and male users (similarweb, 2024). While both platforms are sites of fan discourses, Tumblr users have long actively put forward the idea that their platform is inclusive and more communal than most, in addition to sustaining myriad subcultural pockets and generally resisting commercialization efforts (Hagan, 2023). It has also “fostered a welcoming space for people identifying as female, queer, or non-cisgendered,” which “contrasted the heteronormative norms of male-dominated online spaces” (Hagan, 2023: 1287). Tumblr also remains an understudied platform in netnography (Kozinets, 2020). Twitter/X, on the other hand, has been the subject of extensive study, as its massive volume of user generated data was available through free APIs for a long time, making research on Twitter attractive and effective for studying discourses, trends, networks, and more (Dang, 2023) (more on why this is in the past tense below). Due to its longer post formats, Tumblr was especially useful in providing richer textual data and elaborate fan discourses than Twitter/X’s typically shorter publications-although Twitter/X absolutely provides rich and relevant data in the form of longer threads and interactions between several users. Time constraints as well as technological know-how of the primary investigator was also taken into consideration: while Reddit or TikTok could have absolutely provided additional relevant data, the amount of data obtained off Twitter/X and Tumblr was rich and relevant, proving sufficient to build an understanding of discourses, and previous knowledge of the affordances and culture of both platforms greatly facilitated data site investigations, data collection, immersion, and analysis for the primary investigator.

Finally, a brief word on ethics is also warranted, given the complexity of the “consent gap” (Kozinets, 2020: 172) in any research on social media and the internet. All the data collection for this research was strictly investigative-that is, no data was elicited through participant interaction. Immersive data was also generated through the journal notes and reflexions, but these again involved no participant interactions with social media users. Because no closed groups where moderator approval would have been necessary to conduct research were accessed, the publications that constitute the data of this research are considered public. As is often the case in internet research, individual consent from each person behind every publication could not be sought like it can typically be in the ethnographic field (Kozinets, 2020). All the data presented in the next chapter has had actual usernames removed and replaced with pseudonymous ones, as most

of the accounts represented in the final dataset had small numbers of followers and could not be reasonably considered internet celebrities or influencers.

It must be noted that the choice of Twitter/X was made long before the highly publicized purchase of the platform by Elon Musk and subsequent changes it underwent. The choice was made to go ahead with Twitter/X as a data site despite these changes because it still provided an interesting contrast to Tumblr, and the changes were evaluated to have negligible effects on the immersion and collection process themselves. As part of wider changes to the platform, Twitter/X did restrict access to some profiles and replies on publications when not logged into the platform, with changing levels of stringency throughout 2023-4. However, each individual publication and reply that is part of the final dataset for this research is from a public profile and remains accessible without logging into Twitter/X via Google search or other means at the time of writing, justifying the treatment of Twitter/X as a public rather than private site. The X privacy policy also explicitly states that “X is a public platform” and that users publications and profiles are visible to the wider internet (not just other X users), unless they choose to make their profile private (X Privacy Policy, 2023). Further details about Twitter/X and possible limitations caused by the changes the platform underwent throughout 2023 will be discussed in Chapter 4.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

The data collection process for this research took place in two main phases. First, over the months of July-August 2023, Twitter/X and Tumblr were searched for archival data of fan conversations about diversity in *House of the Dragon*. The keywords “House of the dragon diversity” and “House of the dragon representation” were used on both platforms, as well as “Emma D’Arcy” (non-binary actor with a lead role in HOTD). Other keywords were also tested in the belief that they would raise additional discussions of sexual and ethnic diversity (“Alicent Hightower,” “Velaryon,”) but only yielded results on Tumblr, which were eventually removed from the analyzed dataset due to their heavy focus on fanfiction and fanart. Top publications as well as latest publications filters were used both on Twitter/X and Tumblr in order to capture popular discourses, as well as timely but less viral ones. The initial round of data collection ended when redundancies became apparent and theoretical saturation was deemed to have been reached.

Following the initial round of archival data collection, both platforms were regularly monitored to capture organic discussions that may take place after the initial period of data collection. The same search keywords were also tested again through time in order to ensure that as many relevant publications and discussions as possible were accounted for in the data. The second, longer but less intensive, round of data collection lasted from January to April 2024. The data it revealed confirmed that theoretical saturation had been reached at the end of the first round, since similar redundancies in discourses were observed. The additional publications were still valuable in providing new and sometimes even richer examples of each type of discourse and their nuances and refining the typology.

Publications were considered relevant and were collected if they included discussion of HOTD- which could include things like discussion of the actors, the writing, HBO's production decisions, and many more topics. Publications also needed to meaningfully engage with the question of on-screen diversity and representation to be retained for analysis. At first, publications more tangentially related to diversity and representation were retained- such as publications speculating on a character's sexuality, fanfiction, and fanart- but were eventually removed from the dataset if they did not represent a stance on the diversity and representation in the TV series. Any publications that could be reliably attributed to a professional critic, working screenwriter, or other TV and movie industry professionals were also excluded from the dataset, since this research did not seek to identify how the media industries position on-screen diversity, but rather how fans discuss and debate it. In the end, to be included in the final dataset, publications had to express an opinion about the on-screen diversity in HOTD and/or a discussion of on-screen diversity more generally with relevant references to HOTD.

Since data were collected from two distinct social media websites, several types of data are present in the dataset. On Twitter/X, textual publications, as well as mixed publications including images, or links to media articles and videos were documented. These included original posts, replies to those posts, and threads. On Twitter/X, publications are limited to 280 characters, but users wishing to convey a longer train of thought or series of arguments often publish "threads," which are a series of discrete posts linked together through replies. Tumblr, on the other hand, has effectively no character limit compared to Twitter/X, allowing up to 4 096 characters per text block and, in theory, up to 1 000 content blocks per post, with specific restrictions applying to links,

images, videos, and other content types (Tumblr Help Center, 2024). The data gathered on Tumblr includes posts that are entirely text-based and of varying lengths-some would qualify as entire essays, while others are short as tweets-but also posts mixing text and images, quotes, or links to external sources. Tumblr also allows comments on posts and direct replies to other users' comments, but comments are strictly text-based and do not include images or GIFs. Finally, one post format typical of Tumblr is also represented: the "anonymous ask," where a Tumblr user sends an anonymous question to another user, to which the recipient has the option to respond to publicly, creating a text or multimedia post as their reply.

Twitter/X publications were screen captured as a rule, while the sheer length and textual focus of many Tumblr publications made recording them as copy-pasted text more efficient. Publications with visual elements were still recorded as screenshots. Each publication, reply, and comment that was deemed relevant to the topic of diversity and representation in HOTD was captured and saved to two word documents (one for each platform) along with initial codes and impressions, as well as some contextualizing notes. These impressions and notes constituted one part of the immersion journal (Kozinets, 2020), while lengthier notes and reflections were kept in a separate journal. In total, the data collected as well as immersive notes occupy over 100 pages.

Twitter/X			
Round 1			
Publications-Text only	3	Replies-Text only	37
Publications-Multimedia (image, gif)	3	Replies-Multimedia	1
Publications-Links/quotes	1	Replies-Links	x
Round 1 Twitter/X total:			45
Round 2			
Publications-Text only	5	Replies-Text only	5
Publications-Multimedia (image, gif)	1	Replies-Multimedia	x
Publications-Links/quotes	x	Replies-Links	x
Round 2 Twitter/X total:			11
Twitter/X Total:			56
Tumblr			
Round 1			
Publications-Text only	12	Publications-Multimedia (image, gif)	1
Publications-Asks	4	Comments	11
Round 1 Tumblr total:			28
Round 2			
Publications-Text only	4	Publications-Multimedia (image, gif)	x
Publications-Asks	1	Comments	9
Round 2 Tumblr total:			14
Tumblr Total:			42
Grand total - all content all platforms:			98

Table 1: Summary of analysed data

The data analysis was conducted in several stages, but the bulk of the analysis took place after the end of the first round of data collection.

The data from each social media website (Twitter/X and Tumblr) were first analyzed separately, with Twitter/X coming first. As mentioned earlier, immersive notes and impressions were recorded during data collection itself, so the first step taken towards analysis was reviewing these notes while reading through all the data in order to internalize and consider each data example as part of the larger whole of the entire dataset. At first, posts and replies were examined and coded for the main arguments used to support or attack on-screen diversity (creative license, authorial authority, social progress, etc...) (in HOTD but also in general), as well as the types of diversity (ethnic, sexual, gendered, etc...) being discussed. Apparent feelings transpiring in the posts (aggressivity, pessimism, joy, etc...) were also noted, as were instances of previously identified fan behaviours and practices (like fanart, fanfiction, close-reading, headcanons, etc...) This final category was, however, much more visible on Tumblr. Reflections occurring throughout this engagement with the dataset were recorded in the immersion journal.

Next, the data from both social media platforms was examined together to identify common themes, as well as divergences between discourses on the platforms. Immersive notes taken during collection helped to constantly re-contextualize the data. Discourses that defend on-screen diversity in HOTD were distinguished from those that criticize it, but these dichotomous categories soon revealed themselves to be insufficient to describe the phenomenon at hand. Several overarching themes were identified, but continuously failed to accurately represent comprehensive and distinctive characteristics of the observed discourses. The choice was then made to employ ideal-type analysis in order to develop a typology of discourses about media diversity, as typologies bridge “the gap between within-case [case studies] and cross-case [thematic] approaches.” (Stapley, O’Keefe & Midgley, 2022 : 2) “A typology is formed by grouping cases or participants into different types on the basis of their common features, with consideration of how each unique individual represents a particular pattern of features.” (ibid.). Ideal-type analysis was developed by Uta Gerhardt (1994), based on Weber’s (1904) ideal type approach, and helps “illustrate the different patterns of behaviours, thinking, and feelings that participants exhibit or describe, and compare between participants.” (Stapley, O’Keefe & Midgley, 2022: 2). Ideal-type analysis and typologies are derived from sociology and are frequently used in psychology research, where they commonly refer to ideal types of “participants” (Stapley, O’Keefe & Midgley, 2022) (which this research did not have, the entire dataset being composed of naturally occurring archival social-media data). However, Netnography is often employed to create typologies (Kozinets & Gambetti, 2024), and ideal types have also been employed in marketing research (e.g. Cova et al., 2018; Perren & Kozinets, 2018). Kozinets and Gambetti (2024) recently used “material-discursive practices” to propose an “ideal type taxonomy of virtual influencers,” identifying four ideal types of virtual influencers and their communicative styles from archival netnographic data. The present research does differ from some of these past examples insofar as it seeks to categorize discourses rather than the audience members (“participants”) who utter them. However, a typology based on ideal types of discourses (the unit of analysis that replaces the more typical “participants”) proved the most comprehensive way to illustrate how fans in online social media spaces react to and debate diversity and the representation of minorities in media by providing four ideal types, which can serve “as a ‘methodological tool’ or ‘yardstick’ used to facilitate comparisons between instances of phenomena [...]” (Stapley, O’Keefe & Midgley, 2022: 2). Discourses were therefore grouped by similarities following the initial coding and systematic comparisons of the data until four

satisfactory and distinctive categories emerged. The ideal types were defined and named, and their most salient discursive characteristics were also identified. Finally, optimal cases were selected from the data to represent each ideal type. The following chapter presents each ideal type, starting with an optimal case drawn from the data and continuing with salient examples of certain subcharacteristics and differing expressions of the type.

Chapter 3

Findings

This research sought to answer the following questions: how do fans in online social media spaces react to and debate diversity and the representation of minorities in media? How can those fan debates help consumer researchers better understand broader perceptions of diversity? The following chapter will present the findings of this research, presenting a typology of discourses focused on HOTD observed in the data collected from the social media platforms Twitter/X and Tumblr. The ideal types forming this typology yield potent insights into the types of discourses that emerge from social media debates around the diversity and representation in HOTD. The ways in which these ideal types resemble or differ from each other, but also the within-case differences that emerge inside each ideal type, can inform our understanding of consumer perceptions of diversity and representation.

HOTD's fans' discourses on diversity and representation fall into four ideal types delimited by two axes (whether viewers think media diversity is necessary or not, and whether they appreciated the diversity in HOTD in particular) (fig. 1). Some fans celebrated the increased diversity and representation in HOTD and express that it is truly necessary in media (Diversity is necessary/Positive view of HOTD: Vehement Enthusiasm). Others do express that more diversity is needed in media, but harshly criticize HOTD for being nothing more than another attempt at doing the bare minimum and providing shallow or insulting representations, rather than anything meaningful (Diversity is necessary/Negative view of HOTD: Critical Progressivism). A third group does not appear to think that diversity and representation is meaningful or necessary, but praises HOTD for implementing it in a way that "makes sense" or that does not draw too much attention to it. (Diversity is unnecessary/Positive view of HOTD: Dismissive Questioning). The final stance is characterized by an expressed belief that more diversity and representation is not needed, and that in the case of HOTD it was actively harmful in several ways (Diversity is unnecessary/Negative view of HOTD: Purist Pushback).

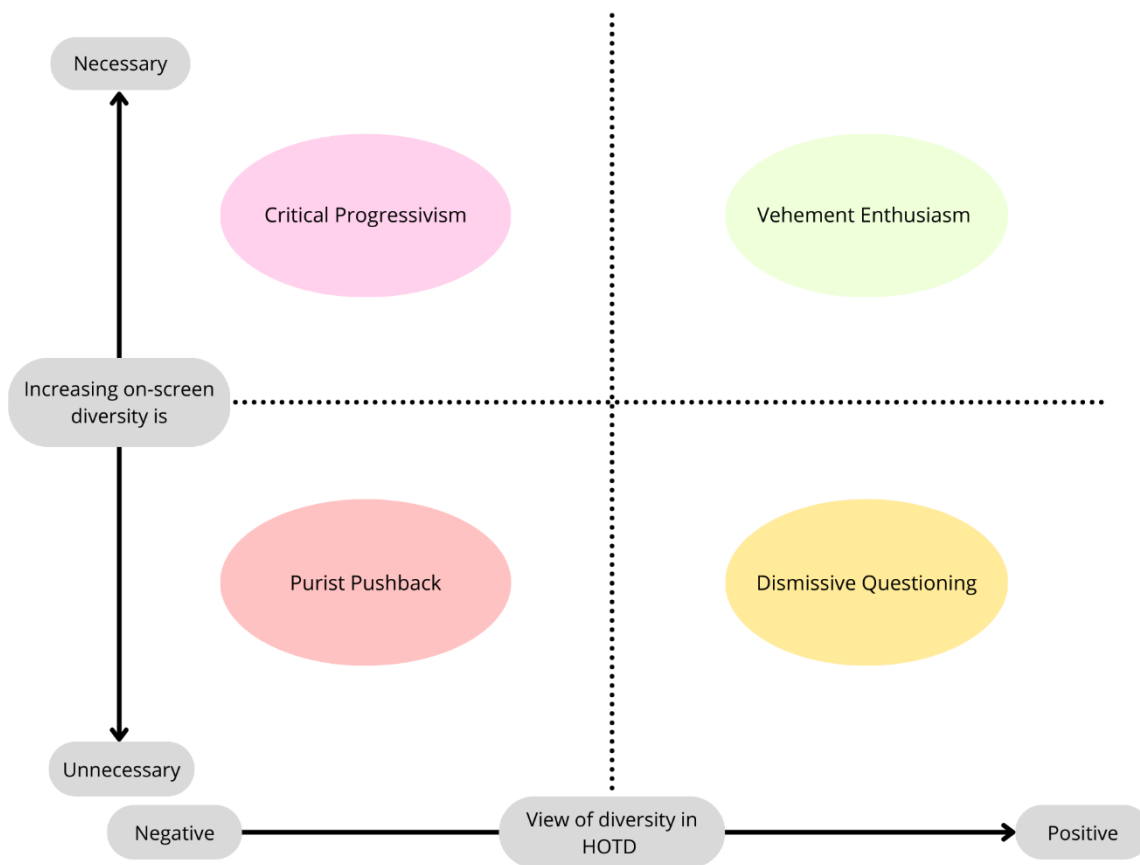


Figure 1: Axes and ideal types

We can consider that the top quadrants want to see more diversity in media, but the top left quadrant felt disappointed with HOTD in that regard, while the top right seems to have gotten what they wanted and celebrate that fact. The bottom quadrants, on the other hand, do not express a need for more diversity (with a mix of active hostility and passive status-quo acceptance). However, while the bottom right quadrant seems to have appreciated HOTD regardless of its diversity (or despite it), the bottom left group attributes storytelling as well as moral failings to the increased diversity in HOTD compared to its literary source material.

Each category in the typology further breaks down into two more specific types of discourses, which are found in varying degrees in each data example belonging to a category. Optimal cases of each ideal type all feature both sub-categories of discourses for their category, but, as will be

shown, the different uses of each discourse by other examples within each type represent illuminating variations within each group.

3.1. Vehement Enthusiasm

Vehement Enthusiasm is first and foremost defined by the uncompromising stance that more diversity in media is necessary and meaningful. These audience members also seem largely content—if not perfectly happy—with the amount and quality of diversity in HOTD specifically. They see more diversity than they used to in media that they care about and are happy to see it. It is not only the quality of diversity and representation that matters in this celebration; these audience members actively choose to focus on the positive in HOTD’s representation in their discourses, whether it is a total victory or an important, even if imperfect, step. These celebrations can take the form of victories for on-screen diversity on a social or personal level. A second side of Vehement Enthusiasm is less focused on celebrating diversity, and more about defending HOTD’s and other fantasy media’s attempts at introducing more diversity. Increasing on-screen diversity is positioned as unquestionably good, so anyone questioning its legitimacy must have darker motives, and are sharply called out. The following example, although short, exemplifies both aspects of Vehement Enthusiasm vividly:

ValkyrieCap: WE HAVE A BLACK GAY MAN ON A DRAGON! Cry harder, bigoted dudebros using House of the Dragon to criticize other fantasy shows like The Rings of Power and Sandman for their diversity #Seasmoke #HouseoftheDragon (Twitter/X)



Figure 2: Picture of Laenor Velaryon included in ValkyrieCap's publication

During the release of HOTD in the fall of 2022, ValkyrieCap posts to Twitter/X in celebration of what is an important moment for her in media: the character of Laenor Velaryon is of great

significance to her because, as a “black gay man on a dragon”, he symbolizes an important step forward in representation in the fantasy genre for ValkyrieCap. Up until this episode featuring a young adult Laenor aired, the visible and explicit diversity in HOTD was fairly limited, with the overwhelming majority of main characters remaining white and, at least on the surface, straight. However, with this episode, Laenor enters the narrative in earnest (the son of Lord Corlys Velaryon – played by Caribbean-British actor Steve Toussaint), a dragon-riding knight in shining armor, who also happens to be homosexual. His lover(s) will also feature in later episodes.

In her post, ValkyrieCap does not comment on the complexity of Laenor as a character, his writing, or the quality of HOTD as a whole. His simple presence as an important and symbolically high-value character – being a dragonrider is the prerogative of the powerful, near-mystical Valyrian people in the HOTD universe – is enough to warrant celebration for ValkyrieCap. Depending on the exact time of her tweet, it is even possible that she is celebrating his presence in a trailer or clips of the episode that had yet to air in full. That is, ValkyrieCap might not even need to evaluate the quality of the writing and Laenor’s character’s importance to the plot of HOTD to celebrate his presence, what it means for media, and the anguish his mere presence will cause “bigoted” viewers of the show in ValkyrieCap’s opinion.

For this, ValkyrieCap anticipates that the character will only further upset people who speak out against diversity in media. “Cry harder, bigoted dudebros,” she gloats, addressing the people she sees as indiscriminately attacking “other fantasy shows” simply because they feature a diverse cast. Laenor Velaryon represents for her a perfect cocktail of elements to anger certain fans of HOTD, which ValkyrieCap describes in tears at the idea that a show which they enjoyed until that point suddenly forces them to choose between their avowed anti-diversity or anti-wokeness stance, and their fandom. To be upset about this casting is to be a “bigoted dudebro”-someone who is anti-diversity and in the wrong, someone ValkyrieCap automatically and vehemently disagrees with.

In that second part of the publication, ValkyrieCap also illustrates another aspect of this powerful celebration of meaningful diversity for her: the anticipation of retaliation and the bellicose potential that accompanies it. ValkyrieCap strongly asserts an us versus them stance through her uses of the pronoun “we” (we who celebrate advances in diversity), followed by their direct address to “bigoted dudebros” (them, those who would not just not celebrate, but *oppose* diversity).

ValkyrieCap is not responding to a “bigoted dudebros” tweet directly, but she is inferring from her knowledge and experience of wider recent discourses (backlash directed at Amazon’s *The Rings of Power* and Netflix’s *Sandman*) that her stance is in direct opposition to these “dudebros.” This type of post-responding to a collectivized other side of the discourse without actually being a direct response to a specific tweet or blog post-can be observed in several Vehement Enthusiasm examples, making ValkyrieCap’s post an effective example of this stance on many levels-she is signaling that she knows these “dudebros” are out there, and she is ready to defend diversity in HOTD, Sandman, and Rings of Power.

She does so more explicitly later on in the same thread, in response to a reply criticizing the lore-accuracy of the diverse casting choices made by Amazon for Rings of Power (we will examine the reply in more detail in a later section, as it does provide a relevant example of Dismissive Questioning):

Imploreinside: Having someone from house Velaryon being black, whilst not being book accurate, makes more sense within the world than what is seen in Rings of Power. Not show why him being gay matters, there's a good number of non heterosexual people in the books.

ValkyrieCap: Your argument against Rings of Power is ignorant, since Tolkien himself described harfoots as dark brown skin. Did you read the books? Because I did. Purposely or not, you are disseminating misinformation and racism. (Twitter/X)

This exchange is obviously not strictly about HOTD, as ValkyrieCap brought up *The Rings of Power* (TROP) in her original publication. The discussion surrounding HOTD online often devolves into discussing TROP, as well as other intellectual properties that fans seem to group in the same areas of interest (notable examples include *Sandman* – which is mentioned in ValkyrieCap’s post as well, the most recent live-action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* and *The Witcher*). TROP is loosely based on Tolkien’s appendices to *The Silmarillion* and his genre-defining *The Lord of the Rings*. TROP and HOTD did not only have release schedules in common; both shows also elected to cast actors of colour in a number of important roles. Their near-simultaneous release and promotional material featuring actors of colour made the two shows frequent topics of online discussion throughout the summer and fall of 2022 and beyond.

In the exchange above, ValkyrieCap wholeheartedly rejects Imploreinside’s criticism by displaying her own knowledge of Tolkien’s works to counter his arguments against some of the diversity in TROP. While she qualifies her further remark with “intentionally or not,” she also quickly dismisses Imploreinside’s criticism as necessarily driven by racism-wether they are aware of their own biases or not.

While ValkyrieCap’s first publication and subsequent exchanges later in the thread accurately encompass the defining features of Vehement Enthusiasm, several other data examples are useful to demonstrate some of the nuances of the category.

First, fans’ celebrations of diversity and progress can be expressed on two main levels: a celebration of on-screen diversity as a measure and enactor of larger social progress, or a celebration of what specific instances of diversity mean for individual fans who themselves belong to marginalized communities.

DarkFeather : Anyways, reminder that Emma D’Arcy playing Rhaenyra opened the doors and gave hope for a lot of non binary actors and is always brave to aim for a role as big as Rhaenyra despite society transphobia. (Twitter/X)



Figure 3: Picture of Emma D’Arcy at London Pride included in DarkFeather’s publication

This tweet, posted shortly after London Pride-where Emma D’Arcy-the non-binary actor who played the part of HOTD main character Rhaenyra Targaryen in the second part of the first season (and is reprising the role for season 2) was seen attending. This tweet primarily displays the celebratory undertones characteristic of Vehement Enthusiasm: “Emma D’Arcy playing Rhaenyra

opened the doors and gave hope for a lot of non-binary actors,” asserts DarkFeather. Emma is positioned as a trailblazer for gender non-conforming actors and their newfound fame and visibility is articulated as a genuine step forward for the entertainment industry. However, DarkFeather acknowledges that the world in general still has ways to go to accept trans and non-binary individuals and considers Emma “brave to aim for a role as big as Rhaenyra despite society transphobia.” Hence, they celebrate the important step forward Emma represents without erasing the progress that still needs to be achieved. While it does not display the overt expectations of retaliation ValkyrieCap better illustrates, DarkFeather still shows an awareness of opposition to diversity-this time an opposition to gender non-conformity and transgender individuals.

This example demonstrates the more cautiously optimistic tones of certain forms of Vehement Enthusiasm, those that put forward the idea that progress is incremental, taking place in those moments when a non-binary actor is cast in a lead role in a highly-anticipated TV series-and subsequently nominated for awards, signifying recognition and visibility, while also highlighting remaining inadequacies in the inherent binarity of acting and show-business. It also introduces real-world representation to these fan discourses, by focusing not on a character, but an actor, and their presence at events like a Pride parade, intimately linked with questions of LGBTQIA+ visibility and representation.

Fans also sometimes project their personal experiences or perspectives on a text, as is the case with fans who express their happiness at seeing *themselves* represented in media. These fans are vehemently enthusiastic about increasing on-screen diversity because their past experiences of media have left them feeling left out, and celebrate characters and relationships that are meaningful for them and their communities specifically.

clonetroopertales: idk actually when i think about it, the actors confirming that they played the roles gay drives me crazy. in a really good way. because I can see it. as a gay girl, who had those tight friendships with other girls, who knows what it feels like to be separated from them, and feel that loss so deeply. you think about it an embarrassing amount. like, more then you even realize. and you can tell that alicent really does think about rhaenyra all the time. she holds everyone to the standard her childhood best friend set, and then hates everyone that doesn't meet it. she feels so

lonely because no one is like rhaenyra. thinks no one loves her because no one loves her like rhaenyra did. she longs for a closeness, a bond like that, but, frankly, no one ever will have that with her again. because adulthood changes people, and even rhaenyra is different when she returns to the red keep. which is so disappointing, really. she looks at alicent different, because alicent almost stabbed her in the eye. but alicent looks all sad about that, hopeful for a moment, because she can see that her old friend, her old almost-lover, wants the same thing that she does. alicent reviles violence, gets anxious at the thought of it, still lingers on the memory. she wanted to be heard, seen, taken seriously for half a second, and the only one that will ever do that...is the one she tried to stab in the eye.

[#house of the dragon#hotd#rhaenyra targaryen#alicent hightower#I'd go absolutely insane too#so would you#rhaenicient#she misses her so much she'd kill her#and then rhae reads her like a book#please!!](#)

(Tumblr)

Clonetroopertales evidently relates deeply to the way Rhaenyra and Alicent's relationship is being portrayed. Many fans of HOTD like her interpret these characters as childhood-friends-turned-lovers, and they are featured in abundant fanart and fanfiction on Tumblr. However, neither in the original book nor in the TV series are these characters ever a romantic pairing.³ However, clonetroopertales seizes on entirely metatextual information by citing the actors' stated acting intentions (likely revealed in interviews or press junkets) to find an instance of representation which includes her. She then uses this information to see the narrative through that lens: "I can see it. as a gay girl, who had those tight friendships with other girls, who knows what it feels like to be separated from them, and feel that loss so deeply. you think about it an embarrassing amount." This is not fanfiction per say, since clonetroopertales is not writing an entire story featuring Alicent and Rhaenyra's love story-but it is also not just a celebration of explicit sexual diversity in the series: it is somewhere in between or a "headcanon" (something that is only "canon" in fans' heads, something they believe strongly about these characters, but recognize is not explicit in the

³ At the time of data collection, neither character was explicitly acknowledged as a lesbian or bisexual either. However, the second season of HOTD did appear to explore Rhaenyra's bisexuality by introducing a relationship with another female character.

narrative). For clonetroopertales, these subtly hints of the female gay experience, the enduring obsession and codependence that accompany the intense friendship that blossoms into first love, paired with the actors' remarks, are confirmation enough to be positively giddy. This publication illustrates two divergences from the most representative examples of Vehement Enthusiasm: first, it does not feature any defensiveness or anticipation of retaliation, remaining entirely focused on the positive experience of seeing specific experiences deeply tied to her identity reflected in media. Second, it shows that, in some instances, diversity and representation can be extremely subtle or only hinted at for fans to extrapolate more and project their own experiences and feelings on media they care about (for a long time, this was the most many could expect, with LGBTQIA+ representation being absent or confined to subtext and queerbaiting). Of course, clonetroopertales is not entirely engaging in the creation of a "headcanon": the actors' confirmation that "they played the roles gay" is the trigger for this celebration and extrapolation and lends some credence to her interpretation. It is also interesting to note that this publication does not praise the simple presence of diversity (like ValkyrieCap does in celebrating the presence of Laenor, but nothing very specific about his character or writing: he a symbol). Clonetroopertales evaluates it as a fairly accurate (if subtle) portrayal of "gay girl" sexuality and appreciates these subtleties in the representation.

These publications and exchanges all demonstrate the stance that on-screen diversity and representation are inherently good things and symbols of progress. ValkyrieCap, DarkFeather, and clonetroopertales all seize on a moment of increased diversity (real or imagined) that becomes symbolic of larger social progress for minorities and their representation in media. While ValkyrieCap is focused on what the character of Laenor means for media, DarkFeather celebrates progress for gender non-conforming actors represented by Emma D'Arcy's casting while acknowledging remaining barriers. Meanwhile, clonetroopertales is focused on the personal joy and validation she gains from seeing herself represented as a "gay girl"-even if much of that representation comes from her own interpretation of the characters and subtle hints rather than outright LGBTQIA+ representation.

Nuances also abound in the publications that focus more on defending diversity than celebrating it: some are quite forceful, while others take less direct approaches.

Queendiamond: Why is everyone bitching about a black man playing Corlys Velaryon? Dude, he looks fucking awesome first of all, and Steve Toussaint seems like a remarkable actor. He's had a grand old time with this...

"Oh well its forcing diversity, it's too woke! Meeehhhh!"

WHACK

Shut up.

Shut. The fuck. Up.

George RR Martin himself approved of the casting. Whether you like it or not, it's irrelevant. No one is forcing anything. If the creator of a character or set of characters decides to change their race, especially if they haven't been depicted on-screen before, WHATS THE FUCKING PROBLEM?!

Also, I don't really think race should matter when it comes to telling fantasy stories. An actors ability is the only thing that SHOULD matter. Obviously he was great, or he wouldn't have been casted.

Yall just need to shut the fuck up and move on. As for house of the dragon, I really just wanna watch it now just to see dragons and watch people get pissed off over something so meaningless...

#house of the dragon#corlys velaryon#steve toussaint#house velaryon

(Tumblr)

The above blog post was published to Tumblr in July 2022, over a month before the first episode of HOTD aired. In it, Tumblr user Queendiamond forcefully responds to discourse they presumably saw circulating on the internet complaining about the casting of British-caribbean actor Steve Toussaint for the role of Lord Corlys Velaryon.

While ValkyrieCap's tweet foregrounds the victorious celebration aspect of this type of reaction, Queendiamond's tumblr blog post further illuminates the more aggressively defensive aspect of

Vehement Enthusiasm and the defense of any and all increased diversity and representation. Queendiamond similarly addresses a discourse to which they are not directly responding (“everyone bitching about a black man playing Corlys Velaryon”)-that is, their tumblr blog post stands on its own and is not directly replying to another specific publication that they disagree with-but unlike ValkyrieCap, their post is primarily focused on retaliation and defense of on-screen diversity, as opposed to a victorious celebration first.

Queendiamond creates an example of that discourse to respond to in their post, framing the position they are arguing against (“forcing diversity” and being “too woke”) as a whiny complaint as it ends on an elongated onomatopoea: “Meeehhhh!” However, Queendiamond abruptly interrupts the complaint they created to illustrate the anti-diversity position: “*WHACK*” (which often signifies a blow or slap to the head in internet slang), followed by repeated injunctions to “Shut up.” This short bit of writing and make believe positions Queendiamond as utterly out of patience for the criticisms they have seen levelled at HOTD for its diverse cast. Queendiamond’s bit of dialogue also implies that those criticisms are not worth hearing, they are useless at best, and entirely illegitimate and fundamentally racist at worst (and deserving of a fairly violent response).

I use the word “created” to describe the imagined anti-diversity position Queendiamond represents in their dialogue because, although it is not the direct quote of a post that exists-as far as I can tell-it does draw on elements and vocabulary which we will encounter later on, when examining the bottom two quadrants of the framework (Dismissive Questioning, Purist Pushback). Hence, Queendiamond’s summary of the position they are fighting against is not entirely inaccurate, if truncated and amalgamating two arguments which are not always found together in real posts (although the “Meeehhhh” whine is certainly added for dramatic effect).

Queendiamond draws on one final resource to stick it to critics of Corlys’ casting, the authority of George R.R. Martin himself (author of the book HOTD and GOT are based on). If he approved the casting decisions and the subsequent changes to his characters’ ethnicity, then critical fans’ opinions must be “irrelevant.” It’s his story, they are his characters, and he is free to do with them as he likes, which should automatically legitimize any changes: “woke” showrunners are not taking a beloved work and going off-book by “forcing” diverse characters into it, the author approved those changes, so they cannot be, by Queendiamond’s definition, forced.

Queendiamond is less championing diversity in itself than they are fighting back against those who they think see on-screen diversity as a problem-but that does not make them any less vehement in their defense of Steve Toussaint's casting: "[he] seems like a remarkable actor." Their stance is articulated as closer to something like an idea of inclusion by default: the fantasy genre should be open to actors of all skin colours. "An actors ability is the only thing that SHOULD matter" they state. The capitalized "should" could mean that, by opposition, skin colour should not when it comes to casting, but it may also imply that Queendiamond sees the current reality as opposed to this desire they express (that is, unfortunately, skin colour does seem to matter a great deal currently, if people on the internet are making such a fuss over HOTD's cast). They describe an ideal of purely meritocratic casting, where an actor's fitness for the role is not questioned automatically when they are not white, which in a sense is a championing of more diverse media: if casts were already sufficiently diverse and entirely based on merit, and recognized as meritocratic by audiences, these criticisms of "forced diversity" in popular TV series would not arise.

An emphasis on the fantasy genre as a creative sandbox where nothing has to be realistic or adhere to specific rules since it is already entirely fantastical is also featured in several publications focused on defending on-screen diversity (albeit much more subtly), such as in the following example:

TiredDude: I am truly baffled by the argument, "Orcs and trolls and dragons and hobbits and a dude who feeds people to crabs - Those things make sense. But a melanated character? Too far, man." Racists gonna racist. (Twitter/X)

TiredDude is replying to a similar publication about HOTD and is echoing his agreement that there should be nothing in fantasy that restricts roles to white actors, excluding everyone else. Much like Queendiamond, he creates a quote representing anti-diversity stances as he sees them, and, much like ValkyrieCap, he associates criticisms of diversity based on lore or the genre conventions of fantasy with implicit racism.

ValkyrieCap and Queendiamond both simultaneously celebrate and defend HOTD's-and *The Rings of Power's*-on-screen diversity with their discourses. The celebration and defense take place simultaneously because these fans all expect reactionary "bigoted" backlash to what is for them a

positive change in the media landscape. However, they emphasize celebration or defense in varying degrees. Meanwhile, TiredDude represents another type of defense that is largely represented in Twitter/X discourses especially: he simply calls attention to the fact that fantasy worlds are imaginary and do not need to adhere to any rules (and, for him, this lack of rules should mean that no one can earnestly complain about diversity “making sense” or not in such a show—such criticisms must therefore always be in bad faith, always rooted in racism). Unlike ValkyrieCap and Queendiamond, who almost appear to be engaging in a counter-offensive against the “bigoted dudebros,” TiredDude is “baffled” by anti-diversity arguments directed at HOTD. His final “Racists gonna racist” remark also hints at a certain degree of nonchalance in the face of inevitability: he expects these “racists” to always be around and find bad-faith excuses to criticize diversity, and he will continue to be baffled by them whenever he encounters their contradictory rants.

In conclusion, Vehement Enthusiasm discourses in reaction to increased on-screen diversity and representation emphasize the need for more of in media, a celebration of HOTD’s efforts to introduce diversity, and the need to defend them from any real or perceived attacks. Vehement Enthusiasm also acknowledges many types of diversity, celebrating the inclusion of BIPOC and non-binary actors, and LGBTQIA+ characters. Vehement Enthusiasm considers more minorities in media at least a step in the right direction, even when recognizing that there is still much work to be done for media representation to be equitable. The impacts of simply having more diverse faces on screens are considered tangible, both for fans’ self-concept and perceived place in cultural narratives, or for the media industry to continue increasing its diversity based on the success of diverse media, as seen with the elevation of Laenor Velaryon (a “Black Gay Man on a Dragon”) as a symbol of progress. Vehement Enthusiasm is most concerned with the presence of more on-screen diversity as a positive (although evaluations of the quality of the representation are still present), and expresses a positive view of HOTD for having more diversity than what had been typical of mainstream fantasy narratives until then.

3.2. Critical Progressivism

This second ideal type of the discourse surrounding on-screen diversity in HOTD can be summarized as the idea that, while there was an attempt to introduce characters who are played by actors of colour, and LGBTQIA+ characters and actors, the *way* in which this was done on HOTD

was dissatisfactory to many fans who actively want to see more diversity in media. Critical Progressivism generally expresses the view that more on-screen diversity is necessary, but its commodification stands in the way of meaningful representation.

Critical Progressivism also has two main discourses, found in varying degrees in each example: lamenting that HOTT represents yet another example of a TV series which commodifies diversity and representation and does not take meaningful steps (in fact, may *never* take meaningful steps) towards truly respectful and inclusive diversity, and precise criticisms of how it failed at this task, mobilizing behind-the-scenes information and knowledge of the source material. Critical Progressivism is focused on the quality of representation and its social impact, not just its mere presence or the number of measures put in place to increase on-screen diversity in a particular show. Critical Progressivism does demand more diverse media from producers and showrunners, but it cannot be only about how much representation is gained; a variety of diversities have to be represented, characters must be complex and well-written, and the writing must be careful not to perpetuate harmful stereotypes or erase certain diversities which fans feel are consistently overlooked. Overall, Critical Progressivism sees a need for more diverse media, but is critical of the ways in which HOTT attempted to achieve it, and of the motivation behind these efforts.

FarmerJay: hotd is the epitome of white corporate feminism and faux capitalistic representation like all women are saints and good and seem evil because of evil men besides them and yes the wealthiest house in westeros is black but they have horrifying wigs bc the hair department is white

also yes 'queer subtext' while they actively erased rhaenyra's bisexuality and her sapphic relationship with laena, alongside with making laena a second option for daemon making him held her with contempt and making her that corny ass death scene

this whole show looks like a volt feminist woke parody

(Twitter/X)

This publication first demonstrates fans' feelings that diversity and representation are mere tools that production companies use (badly) to cater to more progressive viewers, without any regard for meaningful representation. tweeting a mere two days before the HOTT finale aired, FarmerJay

airs out their grievances with the show's "faux capitalistic representation," further calling the program a "feminist woke parody" due to its treatment of its female characters, which FarmerJay perceived as made much more unequivocally good than in the source material, robbing them of their complexity and agency. It is "the epitome of white corporate feminism" because of its main female characters that have been, in FarmerJay's view, sanitized, to provide audiences with a narrow view of female representation. However, for FarmerJay, characters that are without flaws or the agency to make their own mistakes are not good representation. Similarly, while she acknowledges that the casting decisions made for the Velaryons means that the wealthiest family in Westeros at the start of the narrative is made up of Black and mixed-race individuals, this progress is overshadowed by another aspect of the production-the hair department putting "horrifying" wigs on the actors playing these characters. What this implies for FarmerJay is that HBO cast actors of colour for appearances sake, to ride the wave of progressive ideologies and diverse media, but did not make the effort to ensure these actors look their best on-screen, perhaps not even realizing the cultural significance of black hair and not seeking out wigmakers and hair department technicians with experience working with non-white actors.

FarmerJay also accuses HOTD of erasing some of the sexual diversity she sees in the books; while it is not explicitly stated in the narrative, FarmerJay and other fans see the female main character, Rhaenyra, as being bisexual and having had romantic relationships with other female characters in the book.⁴ She points out that the show does have a "queer subtext" but "actively erased Rhaenyra's bisexuality and her sapphic relationship." The show has "subtext" but real, overt lesbian or bisexual ("sapphic") representation is "actively" erased; direct representation of female homosexuality is too overt for "the epitome of white corporate feminism and faux capitalistic representation," and so HBO provides subtext which is supposed to appeal to queer fans without being too explicit instead. This kind of criticism is part of a long-standing line of fan discourse surrounding "queerbaiting." Queerbaiting occurs when a media narrative seems to heavily imply that one of its characters may be homosexual or bisexual-or that perhaps two characters of the same gender might be a little bit more than friends-without ever confirming it on-screen (Ng, 2017). They are "baiting" queer fans into watching the show with the never realized promise of

⁴ As previously stated, Rhaenyra's relationship with another female character is introduced in season 2, which came out after FarmerJay's tweet.

representation. This has led many fans to feel strung along by franchises that they feel are trying to cater to them while retaining their more conservative viewers as well. Fan debates about queerbaiting range from considering the practice an abominable manipulation of queer fans, to examples of fans using their creative discursive practices to create the queer endings they were hoping for through fanart, editing, and fanfiction, when they are denied to them on screen (Church, 2023). FarmerJay's criticism of HOTD's erasure of bisexual female characters falls squarely in the first camp, seeing it as a watering down of what she sees as more tangible female queer representation in the book into mere "subtext" that most audience members are unlikely to pick up on. Interestingly, this attitude could hardly be further from clonetroopertales' appreciation of subtle hints at LGBTQIA+ diversity confirmed by the actors.

Overall, FarmerJay accuses HOTD and HBO of only caring about the surface-level presence of diversity and representation, which for her is meaningless if not paired with a holistic understanding of different actors' backgrounds and needs. It is "capitalistic" and a "woke parody" because it appears to focus on outcomes and the number of minority actors on screen, rather than meaningfully changing industry practices to better represent characters and actors of colour. It is a "parody" of what people who actually want from more meaningfully diverse media want because it appears to deliver on these promises, while cutting crucial corners in *how* minorities and women come to be represented on screen. This is also not a publication which denotes any surprise on FarmerJay's part: they did not expect any better from "faux capitalistic representation," but they still appear deeply disappointed. She also mobilizes her knowledge as a fan of the source material and someone who pays close attention to behind-the-scenes goings-on to criticize the exact decisions and mistakes that lead to HOTD being nothing more than a "parody" of good representation.

A tension between hope for better on-screen representation and what appears to be a deeply-held belief that media will always fall short when it comes to diversity (and even more so for some specific forms of diversity) underpins much of the Critical Progressivism ideal type.

Melodicmango: So I found out the lead character in the GoT spinoff is fat in the source material.

I'm a little torn, because on one hand a mess of incestuous violence is not at all the kind of representation I want, but on the other hand...

Of *course* they hired a thin person. She's lusted for and loved and has sex and has power and has narrative agency and she rides freaking dragons. *Of course she's thin*. They probably didn't consider for a *second* they should hire a fat actress to play this fat character.

We don't get to be the main characters. We get to be disgusting hedonists, funny best friends, "sweet" (sexless) supporters and literal DESPAIR but the cool character? The sexy character? The DESIRED character? *Even if it's written right there in the text?* Just not possible.

[#Fatphobia#Anti The House of the Dragon#Anti HotD#Anti The Watch#Representation#Anti HoD](#)

(Tumblr)

In this publication, melodicmango calls out the erasure of the bodily diversity present in the Fire and Blood book that inspired HOTD. Indeed, in the source material, the character of Rhaenyra Targaryen—one of the main characters—is described as having gained weight through the years and her many pregnancies. However, that aspect of her appearance is not represented or addressed in the TV adaptation, where she is played by non-binary actor Emma D'Arcy. For melodicmango, bodily diversity is some sort of line in the sand that media is not willing to cross when it comes to representation. Like FarmerJay, she sees erasure of diversity she would have appreciated, and is deeply disappointed, but most obviously is not surprised: "They probably didn't consider for a second they should hire a fat actress to play this fat character." While melodicmango does display some knowledge of the source material as a fan, that knowledge is not the most extensive and appears to have been acquired second-hand, since she just "found out the lead character in the GoT spinoff is fat in the source material." While she does use this information to criticize HBO's choice to cast a thin actor in the role of Rhaenyra, most of her publication is an exposition of her exasperation with poor representation of varied body types for women in media more generally, and how she laments that HOTD is ultimately no different.

In a previous post not solely about HOTD in august of the same year, she points out:

Melodicmango: I just get kind of tired how fat people, but especially *fat women*, constantly get erased, minimized and dehumanized in media *still*. And then the same progressive tumblr types will do their best to ignore it, excuse it or even defend it as “necessary to the narrative” because they’re so invested in the other representation the show offers and don’t want to admit that media still uses fat people as the last acceptable scapegoat, even in “progressive” shows.

[Fatphobia](#) [Anti The Sandman](#) [Anti Sandman](#) [Anti The Watch](#) [Anti Dune](#) [Anti House of the Dragon](#) [Anti HotD](#) [and underneath it all is the implication that it has nothing to do with how progressive the rest of the show is as long as that progress and representation is thin and sexy as if the attractive cool villain couldn't also be fat as if the brooding intense hero couldn't also be fat](#)

(Tumblr)

“Media still uses fat people as the last acceptable scapegoat, even in ‘progressive’ shows” she asserts. While other forms of representation progress-people of colour and queer actors gain more meaningful roles-they still must fit within the ultimate standard of belonging in media: thinness. Production companies and fans are ready to embrace diverse stories, as long as those portraying them are considered thin and, by extension, beautiful: “#as long as that progress and representation is thin and sexy.” Meanwhile, the representations that fat people (and especially women) are relegated to are “disgusting hedonists, funny best friends, “sweet” (sexless) supporters.” Her publications also display a palpable discouragement: there is nothing indicating that melodicmango ever expects this state of affairs to change, even as other forms of diversity and representation progress.

While both FarmerJay and melodicmango drew on some apparent knowledge about the source material to explain their disappointment at badly executed diversity or downright erasure, others offer in-depth criticisms mobilizing extensive knowledge, while still echoing similar issues related to erasure, harmful stereotyping, and an overall instrumentalization of diversity by media.

Anonymous asked: Hi, who is speculated to be cast for nettles? And where are people finding out casting rumors? I'll be so upset if they race change her I seriously hope it's not true

Dancingsunset: Lol her name is Rhianne Barreto. She followed some of the HOTD cast and I believe some of them followed her. People are saying she's Nettles because she's tan (and yes I say tan because she's barely even non-white and she's most certainly not black) 🙄 I'm not joking, someone saw her photo on twitter under the speculation and went "Nettles 😁" 🙄 🙄 As if Nettles isn't described and shown to be Black in the official art and the lore video back in 2016:



Figure 4: Official art of Nettles attached to dancingsunset's publication

So that's how this has started. People assuming sh!t and saying this tan woman (no disrespect to her but she's not a brown skinned black woman which Netty is) is Nettles 🙄 Never mind the fact that she very well could be Sara Snow (which she better f*cking be Ryan Condal/HBO). Nope has to be Nettles. We can't let you silly negros have everything 😏 Honestly I'm be surprised the way fans are trying to twist things and if HBO does actually try to race bend the only in canon Black character for "diversity"

Some fans have been saying for months that they want Nettles to be Asian because they made the Velaryon's Black (they also made Mysaria Asian, but yeah let's focus on Black people) 🙄 Like yeah I'm all for diversity, but not at the expense of taking away roles from the hands of actual Black people. Asian people and Black people do not have the same experiences. We are not the same.

This is just as bad as if they made Nettles white. As Black people, particularly Black women, we get so few positive representation in the media and you want to take that away? Nope. This isn't f*cking cool or cute. I am not here for it and will not be supporting the show.

HOTD already has been shown to be anti-Black. They turned the Velaryon's Black and gave them the shittiest story's particularly Laena. in the books is a white woman who is loved by her husband. She dies from childbirth complications not from lighting herself on fire. I do not care how you f*cking spin it, that scene was not empowering. That was traumatizing. Her whole arc was a joke. You turned a loved woman into a sad neglected wife who lits herself on fire because her husband doesn't love her when you made her blackish.

If this woman is Nettles(for your sake HBO I hope she's Sara cause you won't get away with this without backlash) then this is the final nail on the coffin. Honestly this move would be less about diversity and more about not having a black woman being shown in a loving relationship. That's really what this is about. This actress is a more socially acceptable(model minority myth) than if she was kept as her brown skinned Black self.

I can't in good conscience support a show that perpetuates misogynoir. I hope this actress is playing Sara Snow and I'm just overreacting, but if not, prepare to be dragged HBO👊 Don't think you'll be able to get away with this.

#the speculation is on twitter👊 #nettles#hotd ask#anti blackness#I'm ranting#but it needs to be said#bring in a black nettles hbo#not whatever potential 'diversity' truck you are trying to f*cking pull#hotd#house of the dragon

(Tumblr)

In the example above, dancingsunset is responding to an anonymous message from another Tumblr user speculating on casting rumours for a character who would be likely to appear in season 2 of HOTD: Nettles. Because Fire and Blood already provides a complete narrative of the events set to

take place in HOTD, fans can not only compare existing episodes of the show with the source material, but also speculate on what might change from book to screen in the next season. Nettles is a character explicitly described as a young dark-skinned commoner who becomes a dragonrider (something normally exceptional to the Targaryens) and the alleged lover of a member of the royal family. For this reason, dancingsunset considers her a character representing diversity in the original book and would be upset if this existing representation was erased from the TV series, “taking away roles from the hands of actual Black people.” Although dancingsunset’s does not explicitly disclose her ethnicity or pronouns in her Tumblr description, the language of the example above as well as other publications on her feed imply that she herself is a Black woman, and deeply invested in issues of the representation of Black women in media. Her publication about Nettles and her reaction to the situation reflect her sheer exhaustion at being repeatedly excluded from narratives and, when included, mistreated (“As Black people, particularly Black women, we get so few positive representation in the media”).

For dancingsunset, diversity and representation are not a simple game of increasing numbers or swapping characters’ ethnicities without consideration for the narrative, the source material, or the real-life implications of continually reinforcing stereotypes. However, she considers that some in the fandom seem to think that way; since the Velaryon family was cast with Black actors, she fears-as a Black fan-that the one character who was originally written as a Black woman will be whitewashed or *given* to another visible minority (race-swapping Nettles from Black to Asian) because HBO considers that *their* representation has been handled, and there is no need for more.

Even if the actress rumoured to play Nettles is a lighter-skinned Black or mixed-actress, dancingsunset still sees a form of erasure taking place. While she does not reference the term explicitly, we can link dancingsunset’ argument to the issue of colorism, “the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts” (Hunter, 2005 in Hunter, 2007:237). Hence, casting a lighter-skinned actress would fit into previously established patterns of “model minority” and social acceptability, as well as long-entrenched European beauty standards, which within the framework of colorism would correlate with lighter skin.

Dancingsunset also considers that characters that are originally white in *Fire and Blood*, but became Black or mixed-race on *HOTD*, such as Laena Velaryon, do not constitute good representation at all. She and several other fans consider that the character's significance was diminished from the book to the TV series, and links this at least in part to her being a "blackish" woman-as opposed to a white one (we find another potential reference to colorism in the use of the term "blackish": for dancingsunset, Laena is also an example of casting a lighter-skinned Black actress as a result of discrimination towards darker-skinned Black women). For dancingsunset, Black female characters in media are treated differently than their white counterparts, and not in a good way: Laena's positive relationships are erased and she gets a "traumatizing" ending that differs from the book, robbing her of much of her importance. Conversely, she thinks that to be made "socially acceptable" to audiences, Nettles' blackness will be downplayed or fully erased. For dancingsunset, all of this is linked to the concept of "misogynoir"-defined by Bailey as "the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience" (2018:762).

Interestingly, dancingsunset's publication suggests a more proactive stance than some of the others we have examined so far: unlike melodimango, who appears disappointed, but not empowered to do anything about the lack of positive representation for fat women in media, dancingsunset states that, if Nettles and her blackness are erased, she might stop supporting the show and will certainly continue criticizing it sharply. Her publication also echoes and expands on FarmerJay's exasperation with instrumentalized diversity, clearly conveying that she thinks production companies only care about surface-level diversity for appearances' sake, rather than genuinely committing to meaningful diverse stories and changes in industry practices.

Anonymous asked: I watched *House of the Dragon*, and I couldn't help notice all the show bosses were men :(Do you think it's possible for people to tell compelling stories about affinity groups besides their own?

Quillpoet: Umm... I suppose it's possible, but it's completely unnecessary and a terrible practice. You want to tell a story about the patriarchy and yet not put any women behind the scenes in charge? Seriously? There are so many great women writers and directors who would have benefited enormously from being show runners. And then

you could have taken credit for being the "good guys" who could tolerate having women in charge.

That being said, I do realize that there are some women writers involved. I hope their voices are heard in the writer's room.

[#was Michelle MacLaren not available?#representation is just like the bare minimum#it's so easy compared to everything else#anti hotd#house of the dragon](#)

(Tumblr)

Shortly after the first episode of HOTD aired in August of 2022, quillpoet responds to an anonymous message from a fellow viewer and Tumblr user. Both lament the fact that there are no female showrunners behind the production of HOTD, and quillpoet considers it “completely unnecessary and a terrible practice” that a TV series ostensibly about two female main characters and their suffering under a medieval patriarchy would try to tell that story without some female producers and showrunners adding their unique perspective to the way the characters are written. In the tags below, quillpoet adds: “representation is just like the bare minimum/it’s so easy compared to everything else.” quillpoet and this anonymous sender are also criticizing a lack of meaningful diversity and representation, but this time behind the scenes. While there may be “some women writers involved,” Quillpoet seems doubtful of their ability to meaningfully influence the show’s direction and tell a story that incorporates their distinctly female perspective; they are part of a larger “writer’s room,” where their voices may be drowned out by other writers or the male showrunners. This exchange also implies that, for good representation to happen on-screen, it needs to start with the people writing the stories and putting their own unique perspectives into them: stories about women’s oppression simply cannot be effectively told by an entirely male writers’ room for quillpoet.

Quillpoet’s cynicism towards the deeper motives behind diversity and representation is also palpable: if HBO had at least hired some female showrunners, they “could have taken credit for being the ‘good guys’ who could tolerate having women in charge.” Even when production companies do commit to diversity and representation, whether on-screen or in the writer’s room,

for Quillpoet it must be solely for the optics of hiring a diverse team, not because of a genuine belief in hearing out diverse voices and representing many experiences in media.

Many of these examples of criticism also feature a crucial reliance on the literary source material behind *HOTD-Fire and Blood* and its existing diversity and representation. Indeed, both Melodicmango and Dancingsunset point out how existing representation that fans found meaningful in the novel is being erased or is at risk of being erased in the TV adaptation. FarmerJay also accuses HBO of erasing the possible bisexuality of certain characters, as we saw earlier. Fans like Dancingsunset especially display a high degree of knowledge of the source material and an active following of discourses around the TV series and book, which she uses to build her argument.

These examples all demonstrate how Critical Progressivism identifies and sharply calls out what is seen as tokenism and blatant attempts by a TV series to appear diverse, while staying within the bounds of what mainstream audiences will be able to tolerate. Diverse characters are introduced, but killed-off early; Black actors are hired, but hair and makeup departments are woefully unequipped to make them look their best on screen; diversities present in the source material are erased- for these fans, this might be because producers fear they will not be accepted by mainstream audiences. This last question of erasure and lack of commitment to diversity and representation is crucial to understanding Critical Progressivism: they do not see diversity and representation as something shallow and instrumental, but certainly perceive that producers and networks often see it as such. However, these audience members make it clear that they are nobody's fool and see through shallow diversity. While this research cannot accurately verify how many audience members may stop watching a show because they are dissatisfied with its lack of diversity, dancingsunset's discourse does convey threats that she may stop watching the show, while melodicmango and quillpoet make use of "Anti HotD" hashtags. Whether or not dissatisfied fans will grow so tired with lackluster diversity that they might make good on their threats is unverifiable in the data presented here, but the presence of these discourses remains relevant. At the very least, those who continue to feel like networks are toying with them can continue to spread negative e-word-of-mouth about the show.

In the end, Critical Progressivism expresses concerns over the consequences of lip-service diversity and representation. These concerns are related to the meaninglessness of shallow diversity used to attract audiences and the erasure or diminishing of certain diversities in favour of-allegedly-more palatable ones. Throughout these concerns, we can comprehend that on-screen diversity is important for some audience members, but that it cannot be simply boiled down to a numbers game and steady progress in the amount of black or gay actors and characters being put on screen. The thoughtfulness of the representation, not diversity for diversity's sake, matters. Critical Progressivism also discusses several types of diversity (ethnic, gendered, bodily, and more), and often appears to reflect a distinctly intersectional point of view, especially as far as the longer publications visible on Tumblr are concerned. In Critical Progressivism discourses, we find an overall dissatisfaction with the current state of diversity and representation not only in HOTD, but with media in general, with HBO's fantasy epic being only one more example of broken promises. There is a deep underlying cynicism towards the motives of HBO and production companies as well: Critical Progressivism has trouble believing that diversity and representation would ever be treated as more than a shallow tactic.

3.3. Dismissive Questioning

The third ideal type of discourse observed expresses that there is no need for more on-screen diversity-unlike the first two categories examined until now. However, while they do not see the need for it, they do consider that HOTD in particular represents a model "for increasing diversity in television," as opposed to other TV series and movies they frequently compare it to. Comparisons between HOTD and how well it implemented on-screen diversity-and how badly other movies and TV series failed at it in these viewers eyes-are a defining feature of this category of discourse. While it is not a discursive resource that is exclusive to Dismissive Questioning (we saw earlier references to TROP as well as *Sandman* and other shows in the Vehement Enthusiasm category) it is most widespread within this type, and is used in a very particular way. Overall, Dismissive Questioning expresses the view that more on-screen diversity is simply something that is not needed or particularly beneficial, and is accessory rather than something truly meaningful. Nevertheless, if production companies are going to push for diverse media, HOTD is the playbook these discourses express they should follow. Since many of these discourses are also adamant that diversity does not or should not matter, or take up attention or time, it is also sometimes

positioned as irrelevant to evaluations of scenario quality-although it can be seen to have negative impacts in other ways.

Dismissive Questioning features two main discursive characteristics. First, some discourses compare the diversity and representation in HOTTD with other TV series and movies in an attempt to rationalize criticisms and praises alike. To do so, they frequently deploy knowledge of the source material or behind-the-scenes information, much like Critical Progressivism also does (but to a very different end and effect). On the other hand, they also often minimize the importance and impact of diversity and representation-positive or negative-sometimes redirecting conversations away from deeper engagement with questions of diversity.

Orangejuice: It's not diversity that's the problem it's the bad writing. They are so focused on trying to check boxes the stories suck. People don't watch or repeat watch. House of the Dragon is a good story first then they added diversity. That's why it's a success. Disney is all about trying to stick to a formula that isn't working

(Twitter/X)

In this publication, found at the end of a fairly long debate thread around the topic of diversity and representation in superhero movies, Orangejuice responds to a publication defending diversity as positive social progress (something that would well correspond to an example of Vehement Enthusiasm). tweeting a few months after the conclusion of HOTTD season 1, Orangejuice introduces it into this conversation as an example of media that is diverse and successful, because it avoided what he and viewers like him see as an over-prioritization of diversity in major franchises today. First, he refocuses criticisms of diverse media that is bad or unsuccessful as having nothing to do with diversity, but rather with script quality. Next, however, he makes an explicit link between an inflated importance accorded to on-screen diversity and plummeting media and script quality. Productions that are “focused on trying to check boxes” are bound to be less good than those that prioritize story and sprinkle some diversity in at the end-which is what he considers HOTTD successfully achieved. Orangejuice's publication comes in at the end of a fairly heated thread and, in comparison, projects a certain detachment from the situation. He presents us with a series of arguments to explain the failure of some diverse media, but also to distance himself from knee-jerk anti-diversity reactions, since “it's not diversity that's the problem

it's the bad writing." He also minimizes the place of diversity and representation in HOTD specifically, by relegating it to something that is simply added to the story-almost like an afterthought-a step in the process that is inconsequential when done right (or done right when it is inconsequential?)

The discourses that further emphasize rationalizing characteristics mainly display how their opinion about diversity and representation in any given piece of media is built on a rational appreciation of the in-universe logic of the diversity, as well as an understanding of showbusiness and changing audience tastes. In some ways, they are the flipside of Critical Progressivism discourses that use extensive fan knowledge to criticize what they see as subpar and shallow examples of on-screen diversity.

ValkyrieCap: WE HAVE A BLACK GAY MAN ON A DRAGON! Cry harder, bigoted dudebros using House of the Dragon to criticize other fantasy shows like The Rings of Power and Sandman for their diversity #Seasmoke #HouseoftheDragon

Spikey: Having someone from house Velaryon being black, whilst not being book accurate, makes more sense within the world than what is seen in Rings of Power. Not show why him being gay matters, there's a good number of non heterosexual people in the books.

(Twitter/X)

For context, this exchange begins with the same tweet from ValkyrieCap presented as the very first data example for Vehement Enthusiasm. Spikey responds to the original post's vehement celebration of HOTD's diversity and Cap's claims that all criticisms directed at The Rings of Power is likewise nothing more than "bigoted dudebros" feeling threatened by diverse media. "Having someone from house Velaryon being black, whilst not being book accurate, makes more sense within the world than what is seen in Rings of Power" he begins. Spikey's response is aimed at differentiating his criticism of Rings of Power from simple bigotry. Laenor-and the Velaryon family in general-being played by black and mixed actors is a change to the lore he finds no particular issue with, although he does not explain why it "makes more sense" exactly. Spikey's discourse conveys that some shows make changes that make "sense" in order to introduce

diversity, and others do not. Most importantly, however, he creates a separation between criticism of on-screen diversity and bigotry: he uses references to the book, implying that he is knowledgeable about the source material and a serious-rather than casual-fan of the series. He conveys that he knows what he is talking about and is making an informed judgement on the legitimacy of the diversity in HOTD-but also TROP. Criticizing a casting that is not “lore accurate” is thus distanced from racism and bigotry.

Laenor’s homosexuality is also of no particular note to him, since “there’s a good number of non heterosexual people in the books.” ValkyrieCap’s watershed “BLACK GAY MAN ON A DRAGON” does not impress Spikey, and while he does not aim to tear down the character, he also endeavours to poke holes into what ValkyrieCap is celebrating with such intensity. HOTD is better than Rings of Power because it “makes more sense,” not because it has more meaningful diversity and complex characters. While this discourse is not attacking any actors or peddling explicitly racist arguments, it is absolutely dismissive of the celebration of media diversity Vehement Enthusiasm engages in.

Spikey’s response to ValkyrieCap utilized his knowledge of Tolkien’s lore as well GRRM’s previous characters and lore to briefly explain why he thinks HOTD “makes more sense”: he does engage with the question of diversity and how it interacts with in-universe consistency. Others, however, can be better said to dismiss discussions about diversity.

DudeLOTR: Im certain that House of the Dragon, which has diversity, strong female characters, and all that is going to blow RoP out of the water. No one cares about that shit, they care about story and dialogue, and RoP is trash compared to HotD, it has nothing to do with race/gender

(Twitter/X)

This exchange, like many others presented here, takes place early in HOTD’s release schedule in the fall of 2022. An independent journalist first shares an interview he gave about the increased diversity HOTD and *The Rings of Power* are featuring, and the subsequent backlash, especially directed at *The Rings of Power*. While this journalist decidedly supports this increased diversity in a stance resembling those examined in Vehement Enthusiasm, DudeLOTR responds by engaging

not with questions of diversity that “makes sense” or not, but by asserting that “No one cares about that shit, they care about story and dialogue [...] it has nothing to do with race/gender.” Through this, he is minimizing the importance of on-screen diversity in two main ways: first, it is secondary to the more important aspects of “story and dialogue,” something that a production should not foreground or give much attention to (diversity and representation, good or bad, does not *enhance* his appreciation of a show or movie); second, it also serves to minimize the importance of the real negative backlash faced especially by the actors featured on *The Rings of Power*, some of whom received threatening messages (Phillips, 2022). “No one cares about that shit” also likely means that, for DudeLOTR, these reports of overt hate are likely overexaggerated.

It must be acknowledged that there are several examples of such criticisms about diversity “making sense” or not in this research and on the internet at large. It must not be obfuscated that these vague criticisms of something “making sense” or not-without further elaboration-may sometimes well be veiled bigotry (even when they elaborated on, they may well still be). Certainly, there are viewers in the Dismissive Questioning and Purist Pushback quadrants who criticize diverse media out of sheer intolerance, and we must not be so naïve as to take every evaluation of quality that attempts to appear entirely based in pure rationality as devoid of bias. However, the interest of the Dismissive Questioning type lies in its relative openness to engage with media that is diverse-compared to some of the more extreme examples we will encounter in Purist Pushback. Just like it would be a mistake to take every word at face value and ignore the fact that saying that diversity in a given show does not “make sense” may hold a deeper meaning, it would also be wrong-and frankly counterproductive-to treat every single example in this section as unconditionally opposed to any and all media diversity. It is worth acknowledging that this is the exact suspicion some of these discourses appear to push back against: that, in the current media landscape, anyone who says something negative about a diverse show will automatically get tagged as bigoted and prejudiced.

Ultimately, Dismissive Questioning discourses often seek to make the conversation about diversity and representation highly context dependant: this could explain the frequent use of comparisons to other diverse TV series and movies. By demonstrating their appreciation of diverse media that they think is high quality, they re-frame their criticisms of diverse media that they think is bad to focus them on writing quality.

Interestingly, the belief that production companies often misuse diversity and representation (and care more about its visibility than actually writing a good story that is diverse) is an important commonality between Critical Progressivism and Dismissive Questioning, though they position it very differently. For Critical Progressivism, it is a sad state of affairs to see diversity and representation reduced to promotional selling points with nothing meaningful behind them. For Dismissive Questioning, however, diversity and representation *are*, by nature, secondary. As such, they become problematic for Dismissive Questioning when they attempt to be something that they are not (meaningful and worth loads of praise) or that they should not be (too important to the production process).

This type of discourse also happens to be the most driven by interactions with other types: indeed, Vehement Enthusiasm and Critical Progressivism publications are often spontaneous, not direct responses to other people's publications. Dismissive Questioning, however, is often found in the replies to Vehement Enthusiasm publications, rather than as spontaneous utterances (examples of this do exist, but they appear to be less typical than for the other categories).

3.4. Purist Pushback

The final type of discourse observed in this research corresponds to opinions which are not favourable to increasing diversity in fantasy media and further disliked HOTTD's attempts at creating a more inclusive fantasy narrative for mass audiences. Purist Pushback, similarly to Dismissive Questioning, does not consider more on-screen diversity necessary. However, it grants on-screen diversity in fantasy media a much more significant disruptive power. While Dismissive Questioning does not grant diversity and representation in HOTTD much merit for the show's quality, Purist Pushback certainly blames it for its shortcomings. Overall, Purist Pushback is also a very angry and frustrated type of discourse, which distinguishes it from the more outwardly rational or dismissive Dismissive Questioning. It also happens to be the type of discourse least observed in this research (however, this does not mean that it is not present or less frequent on the internet at large.)

Purist Pushback features two sub-types of discourse. The first is most unhappy with how the diversity and representation in HOTTD does not respect the established lore of George R. R. Martin's fantasy world, and points out these transgressions, dissecting the diversity to criticize it.


Therefore, their discourses are largely focused on the diverse casting decisions made by HBO for *House of the Dragon* based on lore and authorial intent justifications. In this sense, they are the opposite of Vehement Enthusiasts who praise HODT's diversity not for "making sense," but because its mere presence is significant to them. As we saw earlier, some Vehement Enthusiasm discourses discount the idea of "making sense" altogether given the fantasy setting of HODT; since it is a made-up world, how does one become the arbiter of what makes sense or not? For these lore purists, however, there are rules and expectations on-screen diversity should adhere to, and HODT transgresses them in ways that harm its storytelling. These fans also mobilize their knowledge, like Critical Progressivism, to detail exactly what works and what does not. The second finally introduces an explicit example of the type of discourse people like ValkyrieCap (p. 43) associate with "bigoted dudebros," exhibiting strong feelings of anger and perhaps fear at the presence of diversity where they have decided it does not belong. They also introduce distinctly political and reactionary undertones to the conversation, speaking about diversity and representation as a force to be resisted, a harbinger of "wokeness."

Some lore purists are still willing to "turn [their] brain off" and enjoy a show that has unnecessary and lore-disturbing diversity and representation. For some, however, the stakes are much higher, as the diversity and representation in HODT does not just affect the workings of its fictional world but represents a genuine ideological threat that by its very presence had an impact on HODT-and society at large.

Idrinkandiknowthings: Charles Dance said he would sign a petition to remake the final season of 'Game of Thrones'

Seamus: Last 4 seasons need to be remade ffs

House of the dragon can get fkd too. Race swapping established characters and their whole family despite contracting the lore purely to force diversity and woke ideologies

 (Twitter/X)

In this exchange, Seamus is replying to a tweet claiming that Charles Dance, who played a major character on *Game of Thrones* for several seasons, would support the remaking of the final season of the famous show. Indeed, the final season(s) of the HBO production were controversial with

fans, earning the last season alone 6 out of the 10 worst rated episodes of the entire series based on IMDB scores.

Seamus, however, lumps the last four seasons of the show with what needs to be remade, along with the first season of HOTD, out for a few months at the time of this exchange. While we cannot gather from this reply alone what exactly are Seamus's grievances with the conclusion of GOT, for him, the introduction of diversity and representation in HOTD is enough on its own to put the first season of the show on-par with the last season(s) of GOT-that is, it is unbelievably bad, and needs to be remade from scratch. Calls to remake the last few seasons of GOT have been floating around the internet since the final few episodes of the series aired, leaving many fans heavily disappointed with the conclusion of the epic series (Sarkisian, 2020). Calling for these seasons to be remade is also asking, however, for them to be de-canonized, and replaced with a "better" ending that can then be considered legitimate. It is a step above regular criticism: they are asking for a re-do, a complete erasure of a version of the narrative many fans found so distasteful. For Seamus, the diversity in HOTD is deserving of the same fate: it constitutes such a transgression the only reparation possible is not even to phase it out moving forward, but to entirely write over the first season.

Seamus also refers to "Race swapping established characters"-something that several other exchanges documented in this research also take issue with. However, for Seamus there appears to be no possibility to appreciate the show *despite* it. HOTD can "get fkd" because it is forcing "diversity and woke ideologies."

The idea of *forcing* or *imposing* diversity and representation on viewers is commonplace in the two ideal types that do not think on-screen diversity is necessary. However, the stakes are somewhat higher for Seamus than in other examples: finding something unnecessary or inaccurate to the source material is a different thing altogether than suspecting media of *forcing* a "woke" *ideology* through our screens. While the term "woke" originates from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and evolved to mean being generally aware of social injustices (linked to race, but also eventually gender and sexuality), it has come to be used by right-wing and conservative commentators as "an insult used against anyone who fights fascism, racism and other forms of injustices and discrimination as well as to signify a supposed progressive over-reaction"

(Cammaerts, 2022: 735). This use of the term “woke” in a derogatory way does appear increasingly widespread, and, as far as it appears in the findings of this research, it is indeed positioned as an insult.

Most of the criticisms of on-screen diversity we have examined so far are deeply cynical: diversity is needed but its commodified, or it is not needed precisely because it is always commodified. This aspect of Purist Pushback, however, is far from cynical. It sees diversity and representation as a legitimate threat, an ideology that production companies are espousing and pushing onto their viewers, whether they like it or not (and destroying series like *HOTD* in the process).

While Seamus does mention “contracting the lore” to explain part of his grievances with *HOTD*’s diversity, he does not go into any detail; these changes are a problem *because* they introduced diversity and “woke ideologies”—no matter how they were executed. The more lore-focused examples of Purist Pushback focus much more heavily on source material accuracy to explain their grievances.

Jasonfan: about the upcoming *asoiaf* show about Aegon I and his wives and the conquering; will they cast biracial people as the conquerors?

thanks to *House of the Dragon*, we all know that the Velaryons canonically are black. and since Aegon Targaryen (the conqueror's father) married Lady Valaena, a daughter of *House Velaryon*, that would technically make the conqueror's half black.

only asking cause i see a bunch of my fave *asoiaf* content creators on tiktok making fancasts for the new show and they are all white people. i don't have any problem with it if the showrunners and GRRM cast white people as the conquerors, shouldn't they now be biracial?

[#asoiaf#a song of ice and fire#aegon i targaryen#visenya targaryen#rhaenys the conqueror#house of the dragon#game of thrones#targaryen#velaryon](#)

Dragonfriend: Lol no, because due to Targaryen inbreeding all of Rhaenys, Rhaenyra, Daemon, Viserys and Jaehaerys should have also been black, instead they are all lilly white. For some reason, magically, Targaryen mainline stays white no matter how

much Velaryon blood they got, even though as it currently stands, Rhaenyra has almost 5 times the Velaryon blood Corlys and Vaemond have. Her lilly white Strong boys have double the Velaryon blood that Corlys and Vaemond have.

And if this doesn't make any sense in a story that repeatedly uses genetics and chars appearances as plot points, that's because Velaryons aren't black in the books and the show invalidated its own plot by chasing cheap diversity point. Steve Toussaint is cool and all, Velaryons being black while Targs are white makes no bloody sense. In fact, if anything, Targs should be black and Velaryons white.

Because Targs would preserve their genetics due to excessive inbreeding while Velaryons would just get assimilated into Andal-First Men.

(Tumblr)

This exchange begins with a Tumblr post in April 2023-months after HOTTD's first season concluded in October 2022-of a fan musing on the future repercussions of the Velaryon's now black/mixed race ethnicity; since the family should also appear in earlier events taking place in the world of Westeros, what will they look like in an upcoming TV series which will depict these events? For dragonfriend, who leaves three replies on this publication, the answer is a resounding no, because HOTTD already transgressed the rules about the universe that they very much care about as a fan. It "makes no bloody sense" they assert. In dragonfriend, we encounter a negative reflection of the fans within Dismissive Questioning who may defend HOTTD for "making sense" while attacking TROP for failing to do so. Dragonfriend does provides extensive reasoning for their criticism; HOTTD is "a story that repeatedly uses genetics and [character] appearances as plot points," but disregards this in the TV adaptation for dragonfriend, who is clearly frustrated by the inconsistencies casting for diversity and representation introduced to HOTTD.

To better understand what dragonfriend is saying, it is necessary to understand that, in GRRM's writing and its TV adaptations-both in *Game of Thrones* and HOTTD-family members sharing key traits like eye and hair colour is a crucial plot point which serves to undermine bloodlines and claim that certain characters are illegitimate sons and therefore unfit to inherit a throne. In GRRM's literary universe, a prince having blonde hair instead of his father's black curls is absolute proof

of his illegitimacy and this revelation provokes the core conflict of most of the series. Therefore, genetic inheritance of physical traits is a rule that Dragonfriend expects to be respected in any adaptation, since it is so central to many of GRRM's plots.

Following this logic, HOTD should already have several more Black or biracial characters because of previous intermarriage between the Targaryens (white in the books and the show) and the Velaryons (white in the books, Black in the show). The fact that many characters whose family tree already contains a mix of Targaryen and Velaryon are not mixed race or Black in HOTD is highly problematic for dragonfriend: "the show invalidated its own plot by chasing cheap diversity point."

Therefore, dragonfriend blames diversity that does not take into account the rules of GRRM's universe for causing several characters in the show to not make sense. They also do not expect HBO to take a different approach and think about the wider ramifications of diverse casting in future productions. While this is clearly frustrating to them as a knowledgeable fan of GRRM's work, they acknowledge that "Steve Toussaint is cool and all," suggesting that, as mentioned earlier, they are willing to let these transgressions to the lore slide. Further examination of dragonfriend's blog suggests that they continued viewing HOTD and interacting with other fans. Based on some of these interactions on their blog, it becomes apparent that dragonfriend is a stickler for "canon"-the established features of a universe and narrative-and expresses a view of diversity in media that shares some of the cynicism we saw previously in Dismissive Questioning (but also Critical Progressivism); in an unrelated long publication about the MMORPG ("Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game") World of Warcraft, they accuse the game and its developers of "tone deaf, fake ass virtue signaling nonsense" and of "trying to sell [players] the morality you clearly do not have." In other publications, they discuss the criticisms of sexism and patriarchy present in the plot of HOTD, showing their appreciation for the treatment of these important issues.

Dragonfriend's stance combines an inflexible and absolute respect of the source material and a view of diversity and representation that is also extremely cynical: it is "cheap diversity points" and "virtue signaling nonsense." However, their suggestion that *more* diversity in HOTD might have rectified some of these inconsistencies makes this publication a surprising example: they are

clearly opposed to the idea that diversity that is introduced in an adaptation process is necessary or desirable, but are decidedly less vitriolic and paranoid than Seamus. The line between this type of dissection and Dismissive Questioning's minimization on-screen diversity is razor-thin: both express that respecting the lore is always more important than diversity, but also that diversity is only ever "virtue signaling," therefore is not *worth* disturbing the lore. Where they disagree is on if HOTD in particular disturbed the lore in a way that is *acceptable*. For a lot of Dismissive Questioning discourses that express an appreciation of HOTD, diversity is tossed aside or briefly justified. Meanwhile, Purist Pushback discourses that did not care for this particular instance double-down on the lore-breaking implications of people of colour populating Westeros.

The fundamental difference between the two nodes of Purist Pushback is the perceived threat of diversity. While lore and author intention being ignored is not something viewers like Dragonfriend are happy about at all, it is not overtly positioned as dangerous or worthy of all-out hatred; it is only unnecessary and frustrating as someone familiar with the source material. In fact, Dragonfriend seems much more insulted and frustrated by what they see as transparently profit motivated and incoherent diversity and representation than the actual diversity itself—they even appear to offer an alternative diverse casting that would disturb the lore less by suggesting the Velaryons and Targaryens be swapped (rather than calling for an end to diversity in HOTD, or suggesting he will boycott the show). For Seamus, on the other hand, the threat is much greater: production companies have an active hand in pushing "woke ideologies" through increased on-screen diversity. Seamus only refers to changes to the source material he resents insofar as they are the cause of the diversity pushing "woke ideologies." It does not matter how good a diverse show's writing or how good the actors are; for him, diverse media represents an ideological threat. Dragonfriend's analysis is of course not without its problematic elements: what "makes sense" or not in a fantasy world is ultimately highly dictated by genre conventions of fantasy, a genre that is historically (and remains) normatively white (Young, 2014).

Chapter 4

Discussion

This research sought to better understand fan discourses around diversity and representation in a popular example of the fantasy genre in media (HOTD). Ultimately, the goal was to see what these discourses could teach us about consumer perceptions of diversity and representation more broadly. The preceding findings have established an ideal-type typology of discourses around diversity and representation in HOTD (Vehement Enthusiasm, Critical Progressivism, Dismissive Questioning, and Purist Pushback), and the following discussion will endeavour to show the broader relevance of the discourses documented in this research.

This chapter will first delve into the limitations of this study, then provide a discussion of key themes across the ideal types. The implications of these themes and cross-type similarities and differences for CCT researchers, as well as marketing practitioners and organizations, will be addressed throughout, as will avenues for future research.

4.1. Limitations

This research acknowledges a few key limitations.

First, the fact that only discourses having to do with the first season of HOTD were considered in this research precludes comparisons between different shows' audiences and their stances. As explained in the methodology, the choice to restrict the analysis to HOTD and its on-screen diversity was made as some overlap was observed with discourses about TROP and its own handling of diversity, and because HOTD was considered to provide sufficient access to varying discourses about many types of diversity. However, this necessarily reduces the scope of discourses available for analysis. Different shows and movies of different genres or with different target audiences may allow deeper or different insights into each of the categories of discourse identified in the typology.

Second, only two social media platforms, Twitter/X and Tumblr, were selected for data collection. Again, this choice was made deliberately, with the aim to balance the amount, richness, and variety of data available with time and project scope constraints. This choice does however mean that

other important sites of online fandom activity such as Reddit or TikTok are not taken into account in the findings of this research. Collecting data from Twitter/X in the summer of 2023 also came with its own set of challenges. Following the purchase of Twitter/X by Elon Musk on October 28, 2022, the platform was beset by a series of disturbances such as a reduction in visits, technical glitches caused by the dwindling staff, but also changes to its moderation practices in favour of “free speech”-with the effect of removing several protections against hate speech and misinformation (Fung & Duffy, 2023). Because of this research’s qualitative netnographic approach, these disturbances did not prevent data collection activities, unlike those affected by the end of free academic access to the API in February 2023, a move which has severely hindered quantitative researchers working with large Twitter/X datasets (Dang, 2023). However, it must be kept in mind that data collection did take place during a tumultuous time for the platform, and that the effects of these disturbances on the data-if any did occur-are difficult to quantify. Thankfully, the overwhelming majority of the data collected dates from before these disturbances, since fans were most actively discussing HOTD around the show’s release dates in the fall of 2022.

Both of these choices likely influenced the availability of various discourses. Purist Pushback discourses are much rarer than the others in the final dataset. This is not to say that nothing of the sort was said about HOTD, or that these discourses are rarer in general on the internet-hateful and racist rhetoric surrounding *The Rings of Power*, *Star Wars*, and other famous franchises is very real and documented (Rewriting Ripley, 2021). As mentioned in the methodology, the choice of HOTD as a topic was made deliberately and was informed by a desire to study a variety of discourses. A TV series that appears to trigger more positive reactions than some other recent examples was helpful in providing a range of reactions, rather than primarily hateful discourses, to study. However, it does mean that it is possible that, by examining another series that was the target of more reactionary attacks, or data sites where more criticism about HOTD could be found, more could be learned about overtly racist, sexist, or homophobic reactions to media diversity. This topic is absolutely worth investigating and necessary to confront.

4.2. Theoretical Implications

The findings presented in Chapter 3 provide four types of discourses about diversity and representation in HOTD: Vehement Enthusiasm, Critical Progressivism, Dismissive Questioning, and Purist Pushback. Despite key differences that distinguish these discourses from one another,

overarching themes emerge and can help make sense of these ideal types to reveal beliefs and values surrounding diversity and representation underpinning them. The following implications do not seek to offer simple solutions, but rather a few ways to approach these debates and conceptualize these empirical phenomena through a few perspectives and theoretical lenses.

4.2.1. Fluidity

Before diving into some of the key themes that emerge from the analysis, it will be important to offer a few comments on the types of discourses proposed in the findings (Vehement Enthusiasm, Critical Progressivism, Dismissive Questioning and Purist Pushback). First, these categories must be understood as exemplary of four broad orientations taken by discourses about on-screen diversity, but precisely because of their exemplary nature, exceptions are bound to exist for each of these ideal types (indeed, many divergences and exceptions within each cases were pointed out throughout the findings). It is also crucial to understand these categories as types of *discourses* and not types of *viewers* (although there is certainly some overlap). In this way, this research and its findings vary greatly from King and colleagues (2021), who sought to categorize more fixed viewers attitudes towards ethnic and racial diversity on screen. While we can reasonably expect a certain degree of congruence between the two-it would be difficult to imagine the same audience member casually hopping between Purist Pushback and Vehement Enthusiasm-the very findings of this research do suggest a degree of fluidity and potential movement of audience members across varying categories of discourses depending on the TV series and their appreciation of it. Therefore, it is expected that quite a bit of movement is possible along the horizontal axis (between Vehement Enthusiasm and Critical Progressivism, or between Purist Pushback and Dismissive Questioning). This potential movement is visible in the findings, particularly within Dismissive Questioning: many discourses disparaging *The Rings of Power* and other series or movies in comparison to HOTD could become categorized as lore-focused Purist Pushback if this research had been about *The Rings of Power* instead of HOTD: what changed is not the viewer's stance on on-screen diversity, but the way they express that stance (minimizing or foregrounding its importance, as well as the arguments they draw on) changes dramatically depending on if they liked HOTD or not. While this is less visible in the present research, it is also anticipated that some fans who express views falling under Critical Progressivism regarding HOTD-because of their dissatisfaction with the treatment of diverse characters in the series, in large part-could express

Vehement Enthusiasm discourses about other TV series which they see as offering meaningful roles and stories for minorities. However, this would need to be further investigated by focusing on TV series of different genres and with different target audiences.

Much less fluidity (at least in the short term) is expected along the vertical axis: it represents more deeply-held beliefs about the necessity of on-screen diversity, and while people's views on the topic can surely evolve, they probably do not do so overnight. However, there are some undeniable and disconcerting similarities between the most discouraged Critical Progressivism examples and what we find more typically in Dismissive Questioning and Purist Pushback. What happens when diversity is only ever "faux capitalistic representation" and ostensibly progressive audience members feel duped and betrayed one too many times? Is it still necessary or meaningful, if it only ever leaves the people it purports to represent commodified? Or could viewers whose discourses that here fall under Critical Progressivism be pushed far enough to give up entirely on the importance and meaningfulness of on-screen diversity within a context where it is only ever instrumentalized, effectively adopting another kind of Purist Pushback discourse instead? Marginalized audiences being torn between feeling excluded or commodified is already documented: as Jenkins (2006a) points out, in commercial, popular media, it is only those audiences which are recognized as economically important which will see media cater to them. Nevertheless, this catering is a form of commodification, and makes many uncomfortable.

Therefore, this research proposes a typology of discourses, not viewers, with the expectation that individual viewers probably have uttered discourses that belong to more than one category, depending on the TV series or movie, or the evolution of their own beliefs. Longitudinal studies that pay attention to a selection of fan accounts's views on diversity (regardless of genre) may be more suited to investigating this question further and better understand how one fan may utter discourses belonging to different types (and identifying if some fans more consistently remain in a single quadrant). Relationships between these discourses and the people who utter them also deserve further study: what networks link these fans, and which types of discourses interact the most (or least) with other categories would be worth researching. I have already pointed out that Dismissive Questioning appears to interact with the other types the most in this data, almost always emerging as part of a larger debate or thread, rather than being spontaneously cynical utterances.

This fluidity does not mean that there are not important differences between the types of discourses presented in this research. Beyond those presented as their defining characteristics in Chapter 3, however, there is a specific pattern that is interesting to take into account when it comes to viewers who do not think on-screen diversity and representation are necessary. Namely, Purist Pushback discourses usually clearly attribute blame for bad quality or audience reception on diversity and representation. This was already visible in the findings. However, while Dismissive Questioning discourses express a general satisfaction with HOTD and how it handled on-screen diversity, we are far from seeing whole-hearted support for diversity in the series. Essentially, for audiences who already think on-screen diversity is unnecessary, it appears that a bad show that is diverse can simply be bad *because* it is diverse, while a good show that is diverse is good *despite* of or *regardless* of its diversity. This is not exactly surprising, given the data presented so far and the strong tendency of Dismissive Questioning to either minimize the role of diversity or portray their quality evaluations as entirely based on factors that have nothing to do with diversity and representation.

Beyond these observations focused on the potential fluidity of the discourse categories, three key themes relating to fans' views of on-screen diversity emerge: it can be seen as disruptive, polarized, and instrumentalized.

4.2.2. Disruption

For this first theme, it is important to specify that disruption is intended here as something positive or negative, and both views are represented in the data. Several fan discourses in the data presented in Chapter 3 implicitly and explicitly acknowledge the potential power of on-screen diversity to disrupt established cultural narratives. How fans react to these perceived disruptions is just as telling as the disruptions themselves.

First, there are the disruptions that primarily touch fictional universes. As mentioned in Chapter 1, fans' "struggles for meaning" (Scodari, 2007:49) are nothing new. However, when on-screen diversity's meaning is the object of that struggle, what do these fans reveal about themselves? In the data presented in Chapter 3, fans of HOTD are struggling over the two levels of text and metatext, where the former refers to the actual TV series and its source material (HOTD season 1,

the *Fire and Blood* novel, and GRRM's work more generally), and the latter to the fantasy genre and its conventions.

When it comes to HOTD and its universe-everything based on GRRM's novels, essentially-fans are mostly focused on the adaptation from text to screen, and how this process affected the diversity we eventually saw in the show. Fans criticizing a casting choice because an actor looks nothing like a character is supposed to look like is nothing new-but these criticisms can take on an entirely new dimension when ethnicity or beauty standards are added to the mix. As the findings showed, both fans who desire more diversity in media and those who do not care much for it can wield the argument of the importance of respecting the source material. However, the former usually use the canon to defend existing diversity in the source material or criticize erasures that occurred in the adaptation process. The latter, meanwhile, will instead leverage the source material to highlight the inconsistencies they feel diversity introduces in order to criticize them: they position the disruption of existing canon as the thing they are criticizing. All these fans, however, leverage their knowledge and interpretation of the same text: it is a "struggle for meaning" that, unlike those documented in music fandom, for example, is not clearly delimited generationally (Obiegbu et al., 2019), but ideologically.

Somewhat obviously, fans who think media diversity is important will be more tolerant of changes to the source material, insofar as they support changes that introduce more diversity and better representation. In this sense, these fans celebrate the disruption of an original text they saw as woefully lacking in diversity. However, as illustrated largely by Critical Progressivism discourses, these fans remain attentive to the source material in uncovering differences in treatment and depiction of characters (like erasing a character's blackness, or reducing the importance of certain characters' storylines compared with their white literary counterpart).

Fans who do not think more diversity is necessary also attribute it an additional disruption: impact on a show's *quality*. Several discourses documented in this research express suspicions at the true harmlessness of on-screen diversity and representation: it becomes described as superfluous exigence that media now has to meet, curtailing creative freedoms. Terms like "forced diversity," "mandatory diversity casting," and "quotas" all appear. For certain viewers, media that prioritizes diversity and representation appears to do so at the expense of story and other attributes. However,

how these viewers determine if diversity is simply present, or was a real focus of the production team, is less clear. This does open the possibility that any series or movie that is considered bad and also features a diverse cast could see its diversity blamed as the source of its quality issues—whether or not the production actually attributed resources to implementing DEI practices. Conversely, discourses like Seamus’s could easily serve to express that any media that is diverse is by default bad.

As a TV series belonging to the fantasy genre, however, *HOTD* is open to disruptions on another level: broad genre conventions that have become accepted through influential works like Tolkien’s, and used and reused by many works belonging to the genre since. Again, some fans explicitly celebrate disruptions to what many see as a genre dominated by white, heterosexual, male characters. Celebrations like ValkyrieCap’s do not exist in a vacuum; a “black gay man on a dragon” is an anomaly and a step towards progress to be celebrated precisely because it is anomalous. Conversely, several Dismissive Questioning or Purist Pushback discourses seem to profoundly dislike disruption (the less, the better). These discourses do reveal that, whatever the reality, a lot of fans of fantasy media do conceptualize the genre as male-dominated, and implicitly white. Some fans think that should change and thus celebrate the disruption of this norm, while others push back against these disruptions (because they are comfortable with the current status quo, or out of conscious racism and exclusionary beliefs, can be hard to distinguish at times).

It is obvious that both the fans who celebrate the disruptions as well as those who resent them grant them an enormous amount of power, one which transcends the fictional universe depicted in the series. It is probably most tempting, throughout this chapter and the last, to wonder “So what? It’s a made up story in a world full of dragons and magic, why do people care about diversity so much in this context?” Evidently, a lot of fans *do* absolutely care.

Fans who wish for more on-screen diversity and representation (exemplified in Vehement Enthusiasm and Critical Progressivism) express it matters as a measure but also enactor of social progress. Some consider that it is personally meaningful to them as members of minority groups to see people who look like them in mass media hits like *HOTD*. Others express a desire to see a better representation of society’s diversity whether it affects them or not.

The importance of on-screen diversity to the perception of minority groups is documented (Tukachinsky Mastro & Yarchi, 2017), as is the power of representation more generally to enact cultural change: when something is represented, displayed, made visible, its cultural acceptance and popularity can increase (Sandikci & Get, 2010). Furthermore, in today's culture, television is "chiefly responsible for disseminating idealized narratives about culture that viewers (i.e., consumers) may actively seek out [...] and appropriate for use in their identity construction" (Russell, Schau & Crockett, 2013: 120). American culture and entertainment also have a long and not always fortunate history of representing people and past events in order to shape contemporary political, social, and racial ideas and orders. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a slew of novels, minstrel shows, poetry books, and some of the earliest Hollywood blockbusters like *Birth of a Nation* (1915), had a heavy hand in the process of redeeming the defeated slaveholding South in the eyes of American culture following the Civil War (1861-865) and facilitating reconciliation for (white) americans. These narratives widely romanticized the antebellum South and organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, at the same time as they demonized Black men, contributing to (although not entirely causing) northern *laissez-faire*, freeing the South to reinstate segregation, voting restrictions, and widespread violence upon Black populations, undoing many of the advances of Reconstruction (Prince, 2014). Fans who care about good on-screen representation for minorities have historical and contemporary precedent backing up their claims: popular media has been used to build and maintain prejudice with devastating effects in the past.

In Vehement Enthusiasm's celebration of steps forward for gender non-conforming actors like Emma D'Arcy, but also in Critical Progressivism's, albeit disappointed, hopes for more meaningful roles for actors of colour, or those who do not fit traditional Hollywood beauty standards (namely, thinness), we can surmise that these fans recognize the power of popular media narratives. It follows that disrupting the homogeneity of enormously popular stories would be a desirable outcome for them. In short, it is *not* just a story, it is a vehicle of change for what popular stories look like, and what they depict, which in turn can have real impacts on culture and society as a whole. Disruption here represents hope. This power does help explain the intense reactions of pro-diversity fans who felt let down by HOTD: its about real-world perceptions just as much as it is about the satisfaction of seeing diverse faces in fantasy narratives.

Meanwhile, fans who are more resistant to changes to the agreed upon conventions of fantasy often position diversity and representation in HOTD (and *The Rings of Power*) as disruptive of those conventions. Appeals to authors's intentions are invoked, as are arguments that fantasy, despite being an imagined world in which many of the rules of reality are already broken, does have rules which must be adhered to. The creativity and imagination does not make it, for these viewers, at least, a neutral playground in which to safely engage with difficult topics and alternative interpretations (Stephan, 2016). The world of fantasy is grounded in rules that have their basis in some form of reality-wether we are talking about literary conventions, or the parts of our reality they do reflect. Previous research on *Game of Thrones* fans did show that the historically-inspired context of Westeros leads to an assumption that, since it is ostensibly based on medieval Europe, then the lack of diversity is considered the most realistic alternative by fans (Young, 2014). Not only do these fans seem to imagine an incredibly homogenous, white past for Europe, but they also see fantasy that takes place in a European-esque setting as necessarily representative of this imagined past. These pseudo historical arguments may be seized upon by pro-diversity fans who will question their very validity by putting forward and defending the idea of a not-so-white medieval Europe. Ultimately, diverse fantasy media in particular disturbs some deeply held pre-conceived notions about not only imaginaries, but the real past they are inspired by. Several viewers end up talking about diversity and representation as an anachronistic application of modern values on a literary genre and imagined past, trampling their previously established rules in the process.

Several fans recognize this disruption of the genre as a key in the discourse, especially within Vehement Enthusiasm and Purist Pushback. This is visible in the first's celebration of the steps forward which constitutes the disruptions, but also in its bracing for reactionary impact when it anticipates the arrival of "bigoted dudebros" who will inevitably emerge. Conversely, Purist Pushback sees an attack on the lore and genre (a genre which is normatively white), a disruption of rules which, for them, threatens media quality and society.

Within this theme of disruptions, I now want to argue for the consideration of media fandom, but also of the fantasy genre, as fields in the bourdieusian sense (Hills, 2018). Fans have also been described as "consecrating agents" in the bourdieusian sense (Shefrin, 2004: 269) in the past. Bourdieu defines a field as "a network of objective relations (of domination or subordination, of

complementary or antagonism, etc.) between positions. Each position is objectively defined by its objective relation to the other positions (2022: 219-220).”⁵

Fields are characterized by the relations between the positions within them, but also by the disruptions new entrants introduce in fields, where they may disrupt the established status-quo of relations. In this context, the existing dominant forces within fields have a vested interest in pushing back against disruptions, while new entrants and the dominated within fields have a contrary interest in upending the rules by which the field operates (and which uphold the dominants’ position). According to Bourdieu,

“cultural producers, especially in times of crisis, can use the power conferred upon them by their capacity to produce a systematic and critical representation of the social world in order to mobilize the virtual force of the dominated, and contribute to subvert the established order within the field of power.” (2022: 246-247)

Within media fandom and fantasy media, previously argued to remain normatively white (or at least colourblind) and Eurocentric, it is clear from the findings of this research that diversity is a disruption (whether it is celebrated or resisted). For certain fans who are against media diversity (or do not think it belongs in fantasy media more specifically), this disruption triggers a defense. They “define the boundaries” and “control entry” to “defend the established order of the field” (Bourdieu, 2022: 210-211) re-asserting the normative aspects which, for them, appear to define these fields. However, “it is already to exist within a field to produce effects within it, whether they be simple reactions, of resistance or exclusion.” (ibid.) The disruptors (those who want more diversity in media) also appear keenly aware of their disruptions of the “doxa” or “what is taken for granted as self-evident” (Hills, 2018: 106) in the fields of fantasy and media fandom. Hills (2018) has previously posited that “toxic online behaviour” (the kind we might associate most closely in this research to Purist Pushback) is in fact “the outcome of disrupted, destabilized doxa, where dominant groups reactively fight to maintain their now-questioning dominance in a dramatically recondensed field (whilst previously dominated groups are given a greater voice in such a field)” (107). However, the self-awareness of the “previously dominated” and their “greater

⁵ All translations of Bourdieu 2022 are my own

voice” is striking and, for some, this victorious disruption of the doxa of media and fantasy is not always expressed in toxic terms.

4.2.3. Polarization

The issue of diversity and representation in media is highly polarizing and matters enormously to many of the fans that engage with it. Interestingly, even the discourses that argue for the unimportance of on-screen diversity do so forcefully. It is not surprising or ground breaking in the slightest to say that diversity and representation are currently polarizing and politicized topics. However, the degree to which fans themselves seem aware of this polarization (and work to enhance or challenge it) is revelatory.

Considering the previous section and its suggestion that fans see cultural narratives as capable of enacting real-world change and to disrupt power dynamics within fields, it is not surprising that the stakes are much higher than a simple discussion about an imaginary world depicted on screen. Because that world reflects ours, and has potential impacts on it as well, the stakes rise dramatically. Because of these stakes, fans’ positions about diversity is not something that many seem prepared to “agree to disagree” about.

Fans who are particularly happy with the diversity in HOTD, as we have seen, often do not simply celebrate these advances: they are preparing themselves to respond to hateful, racist pushback (with uses of the words “racist” or “bigoted” to describe those who criticize on-screen diversity) because many know that they are disrupting rules of engagement within a field which has historically not favoured minorities and women. The spontaneous mentions of how much they think “racist” and “bigoted” viewers will be angered by HOTD’s diversity definitely calls attention to a dichotomy between viewers. Of course, these discourses they fear *do* exist, these fans are not imagining persecution that does not occur (several actors in recent TV shows and movies have been targets of racially motivated hate messages and threats, as mentioned several times throughout this research). This anticipation does however betray how much they believe the topic has been polarized.

The intense polarization of diversity is also visible in Purist Pushback’s politicization of the issue, turning it into the threat of “woke ideologies” or hypocritical “virtue signaling.” It is also very

visible in the gaming industry, where Gamergate and its subsequent impacts have widely been considered key elements of the “culture war” (Hagan, 2023) (a context which deserves study of its own, and which I surmise would be more than fertile ground to examine Purist Pushback discourses in more detail). The intensity of fans’ interpretative disagreements (Jenkins, 2006a) is of course already a documented phenomenon. However, Jenkins posits that “popular culture matters politically [...] because it doesn’t seem to be about politics at all” (2006a : 238-239). Nevertheless, viewers like Seamus and others vehemently opposed to media diversity as some sort of “woke” conspiracy certainly utter discourses which seek to render it political. For Jenkins, the point is to “find commonalities through our fantasies” (ibid.). However, this can become hard to do when an issue close to people’s hearts crosses from fiction into reality, and when the topic has already become highly politicized.

Interestingly, where Purist Pushback may attempt to politicize the discourse to show just how much of a threat on-screen diversity is (to media or society), Dismissive Questioning tends to outwardly emphasize just how *not* political or impactful HOTD’s diversity is. Minimization appears to work in response to politicization: if it is political, it is dangerous; if it is not, it is certainly not a great and good thing either, it is just *there*, a sidenote. These kinds of minimizing responses have been identified in the past, especially in the context of racism; minimization of racism and discrimination is a common talking point within the frames of “colour blind racism,” frequently minimizing or calling into question instances of oppression or discrimination in modern-day America (Bonila-Silva, 2014). Minimizing the importance of diversity (or the extent to which minorities have been previously excluded from media in the past) appears to draw on similar ideas. Within the context of online discourses which have been politicized and polarized (but most importantly *reported on* as such, and sometimes because of sensationalizing headlines rather than serious research or journalism (Proctor, 2018)), it is important to entertain the idea that these minimizing responses are made consciously: that some of the audience members uttering these discourses are aware of this polarization but wish to cast it into doubt. The fact that Dismissive Questioning discourses frequently appear in the comments following Vehement Enthusiasm to call attention to the fact that no one cares about diversity cannot be overlooked. In minimizing the importance and impact of on-screen diversity within an online culture which pushes it to the forefront of the discussion, there is an upholding of the existing status-quo, or at

least a denial of the existence of any social problem which media diversity would be helpful in solving.

4.2.4. Instrumentalization

The third theme that emerges clearly in the findings of this research is a deep cynicism towards the true motives of production companies and the power of on-screen diversity and representation to improve society. This cynicism is not entirely unlike what previous research has shown in the context of brand activism and woke-washing research (Vredenburg et al., 2018).

First, when it comes to the authenticity of production companies' intentions and commitment to on-screen diversity, it appears that many fans do not believe such authenticity to be possible. Within Critical Progressivism, this cynicism manifests itself as a profound disappointment that proper on-screen representation never lives up to fan expectations or even the source material. For many of these fans, HOTD was just another sad example of the commodification of diversity and representation by a media industry that postures as progressive, while continuing to sideline actors of colour, LGBTQIA+ stories, and female bodies that fall out of a certain norm of thinness, to refer only to the examples presented in the preceding findings. These fans lament the absence of good on-screen representation, but this is underscored by a clear impression that they should know than to expect any better. Some of these criticisms and complaints make use of arguments against the practice of "blindcasting" without naming the practice as such. As Warner (2015) points out, blindcasting can be criticized precisely for its veneer of diversity without any commitment to engaging with real issues of racism. While the diversities addressed by the fans of HOTD are much more numerous than simply ethnic diversity, this idea of shallowness and lack of real engagement with issues of discrimination applies.

However, Critical Progressivism does feature a level of disappointment and discouragement that contrasts severely with earlier fan activists who campaigned-not always successfully, but nevertheless forcefully and optimistically-for more on-screen diversity in the earlier years of fandom. Gay Star Trek fans, for example, long campaigned for an LGBTQIA+ character to be added to the series. Star Trek's moto of "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations" was one justification used by these fans to press for the inclusion of their community on the Enterprise bridge: if the original Star Trek was bold enough to present an integrated Starfleet in the 60s,

advances in social acceptance of homosexuality should logically become reflected in the series in the 90s (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995). HOTD does represent a single case of a TV series, so it is worth asking if these optimistically militant fans still exist somewhere, and, if so, how they would fit into or alter the typology proposed in this research. Vehement Enthusiasm does seem to represent them somewhat, but as far as HOTD is concerned, they are mostly focused on celebrating advances rather than revendicating more diversity and representation where it is lacking.

It is worth noting, however, that this research does not find these disappointed fans to believe that corporations (more specifically in this case, mass media productions) should not have a role to play in increasing diversity and representation. That is, they do not express that narrative brands like HOTD should not embrace diversity as a form of brand activism. They do however express that mass media and the stories it tells exist within structures which make them fundamentally incapable of being competent activist brands. Yet, these fans are still here, hoping against all reason and odds that maybe the next production, the next story, will finally deliver on promised meaningful diversity and representation. Some do threaten to give up entirely (as we saw with *dancingsunset*), but overall, their cynicism does seem tinged by hope. The hope to see themselves in media? The hope of overall better representation that shows all the diversities of our modern world?

These criticisms from fans who wish they could expect more in terms of diversity and representation from their favourite shows, yet fear and resent being commodified, have been pointed out before.

“Here’s the paradox: to be desired by the networks is to have your tastes commodified. On the one hand, to be commodified expands a group’s cultural visibility. Those groups that have no recognized economic value get ignored. That said, commodification is also a form of exploitation. Those groups that are commodified find themselves targeted more aggressively by marketers and often feel they have lost control over their own culture, since it is mass produced and mass marketed. One cannot help but have conflicted feelings because one doesn’t want to go unrepresented – but one doesn’t want to be exploited, either.” (Jenkins 2006a: 62-63)

Here, it becomes helpful to conceptualize HBO and HOTD as brands in order to make connections with the broader marketing literature. As a major television network belonging to Warner Bros., HBO is undeniably an important brand in the media industries. HOTD, on the other hand, can be considered as a narrative brand, a concept which has received scholarly attention in CCT in the past (e.g. Russell & Schau, 2014). As documented by studies concerned with brand activism, consumers are more often than not discerning enough to tell genuine commitments from “woke washing,” and brands that show incoherences in their activist messages and actual policies can expect to face economic consequences (Kates, 2004; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Several-although not all-instances of brand activism can be related to diversity and representation (featuring diverse models in an ad campaign, for example). These studies, however, have generally focused on brands’ conceptualizations of the authenticity/inauthenticity dichotomy with regards to their activism: if a brand puts forward an activist message and takes concrete actions to support a cause, they are being authentic in their activism and should be perceived favourably. Recent research about musical artists’s outspoken support for various social causes also demonstrated that artists who publicly support a cause regularly and appear authentic in their engagement may reap tangible rewards in their related social media metrics, as well as their sales. These rewards were found to be especially beneficial for these artists in the long term. (Nguyen et al., 2023). On the other hand, brands that promote an activist message in their communications, but enact no concrete change behind the scenes, may face consumer backlash and be accused of “woke-washing” (Vredenburg et al., 2018).

While narrative brands, human brands, and corporate brands all have their own unique characteristics and particularities, the general idea that genuine, consistent advocacy can be beneficial for brands, while “woke-washing” could be harmful to their image (perhaps even their bottom-line) seems to apply for narrative brands like HOTD as well. Here, however, the cause is not a partnership with a charity or non-profit organization: it is the commitment to on-screen diversity itself. “Faux capitalistic representation” appears to have the same deceptive undertones as “woke-washing.” Promoting a TV series on the basis of its diversity while erasing existing minority characters or reducing their storylines (or even making the fans feel like this is where the story is headed, like in *dancingsunset*’s speculation of Nettles’ erasure in a later season) appears to backfire in similar ways as cases of inconsistent or inauthentic brand activism: consumers can tell, and are not happy at the ostensible manipulation. Compounding this effect, fans are extensively

attentive and knowledgeable audiences; they have a wealth of text and theories to compare and discuss, as well as their own (sometimes quite deep) emotional engagement towards the story and its characters.

Meanwhile, Dismissive Questioning also features a hefty dose of cynicism directed at the authenticity of on-screen diversity in a major TV production like *HOTD*. Again, the belief that such an authenticity cannot in fact exist is present, but it is expressed quite differently. Dismissive Questioning does not believe in the importance or impact of on-screen diversity: unlike Critical Progressivism, which laments its instrumentalization, Dismissive Questioning describes it as fundamentally instrumental. That is, not only are production companies incapable of being sincere in pushing for more on-screen diversity, but the practice itself is disingenuous and even deceptive. It exists as separate from the media it is promoting: the media, fundamentally, is the script and the quality of the acting-not the diversity and representation it brings to the table.

Even if fans are willing to believe in the possibility of genuine intentions behind diversity and representation, a specific production can still be seen as instrumentalizing them, rather than being genuinely committed to progress and inclusion. This instrumentalization that appears to want to dupe fans can be deeply angering for the staunchly pro-diversity as well as the more cynical (of course, fans who are completely opposed to diversity, as we saw in some Purist Pushback, are always by default upset by any on-screen diversity). Vehement Enthusiasm aside, the other categories of discourse ooze disdain for what seems to be nothing more than self-congratulatory “virtue signaling” or production companies “expecting a pat on the back for doing the bare minimum.” On the one hand, the fans that wish for more and better diversity are disappointed when their expectations are not met and feel duped by the disingenuous use of on-screen diversity as a promise to attract them and other progressive viewers-but they are also not exactly surprised. On the other, fans that assert that they do not see a need for more diversity and representation in media resent the spotlight on measures they already think are superfluous. This last position risks slipping into more reactionary stances of blaming the over prioritization of diversity and representation for declining script and media quality.

Even Vehement Enthusiasm at times does not seem immune to hints of cynicism. Some fans who express joyful surprise at *HOTD*’s casting decisions are just that: surprised! A hit TV series based

in the universe of one of the defining series of the 2010s (*Game of Thrones*) choosing to have a diverse cast is a disruption of a status quo which they, to a certain extent at least, still expect to be upheld. However, Vehement Enthusiasm does not express overt concerns over productions' motives behind that diversity. That does not mean that they never have these concerns, of course, but they do not seem to be the point Vehement Enthusiasm discourses seek to make, since they are more results oriented as a whole. How the diversity and representation got there does seem to matter less than the fact that it is there now: a sign of progress, a step in the right direction, even if it is not perfect, or profit-motivated rather than values-driven.

4.3. Managerial Implications

Finally, this research offers several key insights for brands, companies, and any organization seeking to embrace diversity and representation. It is important to begin with the somewhat obvious statement that there is no one-size-fits-all solution that will suddenly satisfy all viewers or mitigate all backlash. However, I wish to offer a few concrete avenues that emerge to inform practitioners seeking to improve diversity and representation in media or messaging.

First, some viewers see diversity and representation as a “woke ideology” being forced on them through popular media, and, in the current sociopolitical climate, I believe some will continue to see any non-white or any LGBTQIA+ character as a threat. That said, fans who want to see, celebrate, and defend diversity in media are also present (and can be quite vehement and diligent in their defense of diverse media, often mobilizing fandom discursive practices to refute anti-diversity arguments). While “toxic” discourses and hate are often reported on, these positive statements do not cease to exist because they do not make as sensational headlines. More quantitative methods and studies establishing links between discourses and actual viewership would be useful in determining the bottom-line impacts of such discourses. However, proof that consistent advocacy that is perceived as genuine has positive long-term impacts for musicians as human brands (Nguyen et al. 2023), and it seems reasonable to wonder if a similar effect could occur with on-screen diversity.

Second, Critical Progressivism discourses in particular illuminate that even some of the viewers who most ardently wish for more on-screen diversity will not be satisfied with the treatment of on-screen diversity as an afterthought, and that diversity for them needs to be authentic, in front of

and behind the camera. In this sense, on-screen diversity and representation appears to be perceived by consumers as a form of brand activism (in the sense that more inclusivity it is sometimes viewed as a “woke” or progressive statement), it is open to the same risks of “woke-washing” (diversity-washing?) if viewers suspect it to be a dishonest plot to attract them. Therefore, productions need to be mindful in implementing diversity and representation (and should probably stay away from purely colour-blind casting, instead privileging approaches that forestall accidental stereotyping or unwelcome tropes). Writing obviously plays a big part in this. Attention to details like hiring hair and makeup artists who can work effectively with different hair types and skin colours or costume designers used to fitting costumes for various body types, for example, could also be effective ways to take behind-the-scenes diversity seriously. Ultimately, authenticity and care look like they could go a long way in providing viewers with media that is diverse, and respectful of the people and communities it seeks to represent in including them throughout the writing and production process.

Conclusion

This research investigated the following questions: How do TV serial fans in online social media spaces react to and debate diversity and the representation of minorities in media? How can those fan debates help consumer researchers better understand broader perceptions of diversity?

To do so, it adopted a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2020) and examined existing online fan discourses about the first season of the HBO production *House of the Dragon* (August-October 2022) on two public social media platforms: Twitter/X and Tumblr. These discourses were analyzed using ideal-type analysis (Stapley, O’Keeffe, & Midgley, 2022) and yielded a typology of four ideal types of discourses about diversity in *HOTD*: Vehement Enthusiasm, Critical Progressivism, Dismissive Questioning, and Purist Pushback. These four ideal types exemplify the discourses of viewers who believe that media diversity is necessary and beneficial (or not) and who liked the diversity and representation in *HOTD* (or not), painting a more complicated picture than viewers who are simply for or against diversity in media.

Vehement Enthusiasm is characterized by discourses that both celebrate and defend on-screen diversity in *HOTD*, praising it as an important step forward for certain minorities. Their celebrations are however often marred by the expectations that “bigoted” anti-diversity viewers are going to unleash their vitriol on the diverse show and its satisfied fans. Far from passively awaiting them, however, some of these discourses assert their support for diversity in no uncertain terms, and sometimes actively work to deconstruct or contradict anti-diversity criticisms.

Critical Progressivism is exemplified by discourses which lament the continuing lack of diversity or criticize the poor storylines or characterizations diverse characters and actors are given. Several of these discourses appear deeply pessimistic, with viewers expressing that they should have known better than to expect a genuine commitment to diversity and representation from HBO.

Dismissive Questioning, meanwhile, represents discourses that often seek to re-contextualize criticisms of diverse media as having nothing to do with diversity. These discourses also often have the most outwardly rational tones (although they can make use of some strong language to express their annoyance with people who care *too much* about diversity). Often appearing in the

comments of Vehement Enthusiasm publications, they do not express direct criticisms of HOTD's diversity, but rather criticize other TV shows which were also diverse, but not as good in their opinion. Their emphasis on writing quality as paramount is also notable; what they express is that, if a show is diverse and also good, they will like it (and it will have nothing to do with diversity).

Finally, Purist Pushback discourses criticize HOTD *because* of its diversity, putting the blame for the show's shortcomings on diverse casting that "did not make sense." For the most extreme examples, quality and "making sense" are tossed out of the equation, and any and all changes introducing diversity are positioned as the threat of "woke ideology."

These ideal types, while distinct, share some fascinating common themes, chief among them a view of on-screen diversity as a disruptor of tropes, genres, and sociopolitical inequalities. Some of these viewers express this disruption in hopeful terms, or lament its unrealized potential, while others express frustration and fear in the face of these changes of who is represented in popular media (and how). These disruptions cross the border between the imaginary and the real, often lending the discourses that express them a weight beyond a simple debate over different versions of the same fiction. In a surprising contrast to this real-world importance, however, many of these discourses also speak about diversity as an instrumentalized marketing tactic; sometimes, this simply diminishes its disruptive power in the eyes of fans (or gets in its way), but at other times it is used to argue why it should not be a priority at all.

In the end, this research proposes a framework to talk about consumer reactions to on-screen diversity that deals with more than strictly toxicity, in the hopes that it can be adapted and refined to be useful in better understanding discourses about diversity in many more contexts, from highly mediatized events like the Olympics opening ceremony to political parties or corporate boards seeking gender parity or broader diversity. While it does not answer every question we may yet have about diversity and representation and how it is perceived, it is my hope that it will one day help scholars, practitioners, or anyone else, more effectively come to terms with the conversations our society is having (and will likely continue to have), about who gets to be represented in a given cultural moment or artifact, and most importantly, how.

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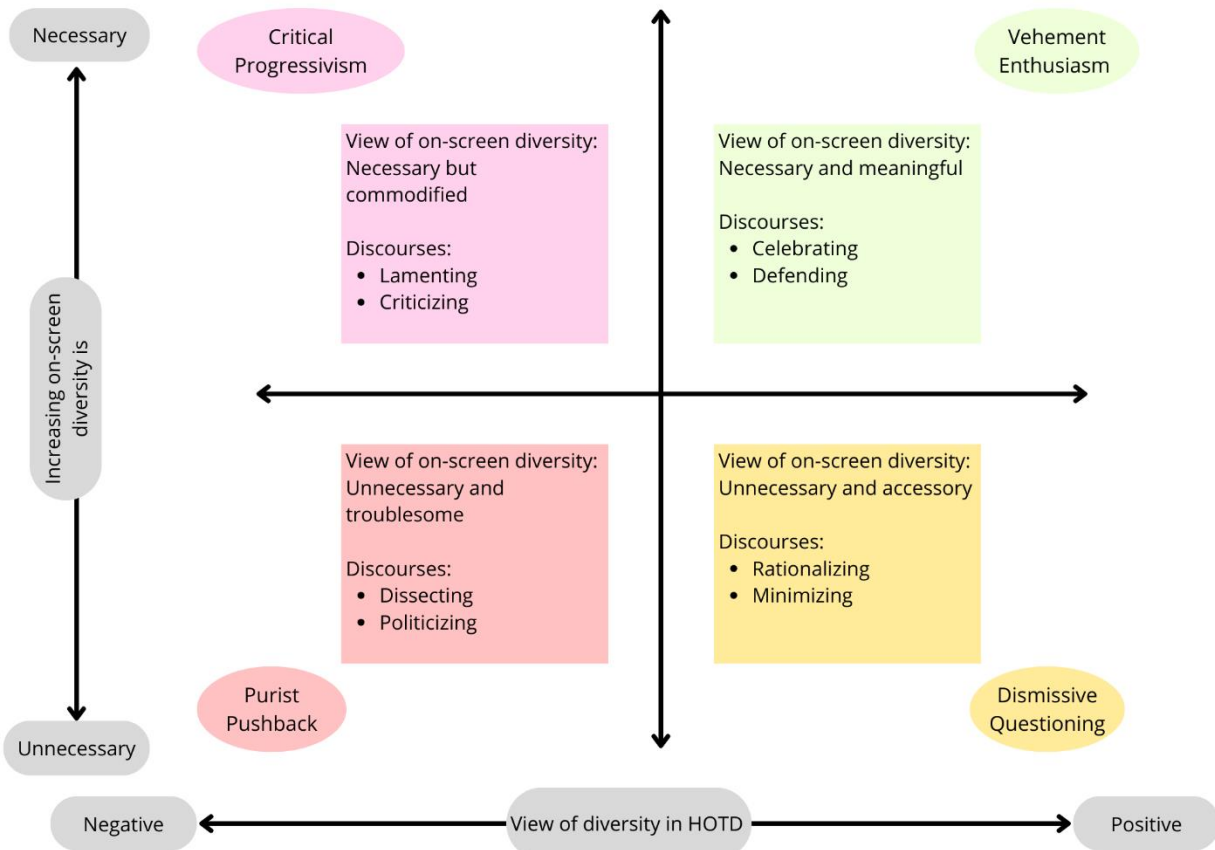
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Detailed typology of ideal types of discourses about diversity in HOTD



Appendix 2: Ethics approval certificate

HEC MONTRÉAL

Comité d'éthique de la recherche

ATTESTATION D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE COMPLÉTÉE

La présente atteste que le projet de recherche décrit ci-dessous a fait l'objet des approbations en matière d'éthique de la recherche avec des êtres humains nécessaires selon les exigences de HEC Montréal.

La période de validité du certificat d'approbation éthique émis pour ce projet est maintenant terminée. Si vous devez reprendre contact avec les participants ou reprendre une collecte de données pour ce projet, la certification éthique doit être réactivée préalablement. Vous devez alors prendre contact avec le secrétariat du CER de HEC Montréal.

Projet # : 2024-5485 - Fans&Div

Titre du projet de recherche : "WE HAVE A BLACK GAY MAN ON A DRAGON": Fan Reactions to Diversity and Representation in Fantasy Media

Chercheur principal : Frédérique Ménard

Directeur/codirecteurs : Jean-Sébastien Marcoux

Date d'approbation initiale du projet : 30 mai 2023

Date de fermeture de l'approbation éthique : 07 août 2024



Maurice Lemelin
Président
CER de HEC Montréal

Signé le 2024-08-07 à 15:48