

The "Faith Goes Dark" Storyline and Viewers: Interpretation of Gendered Roles

Abstract

This essay is based on audience research of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*¹ and follows the storyline of the character Faith in season three beginning from the point when she first kills a human being in the episode "Bad Girls" (3.14) and continuing until the point when Buffy stabs Faith in "Graduation Day Part One." (3.21). Formulated clips explaining the storyline arc were shown to three focus groups, differentiated by age and gender, in order to gain their perspectives on the characters of Faith and Buffy as well as *BtVS* more generally. The purpose of this technique is to examine how viewers construe gendered roles in general. The essay will begin by discussing some theories pertaining to the interpretation of television texts and notions of gender. Following that, the findings from the focus group research will be presented and analyzed in relation to perceptions of gender: the differences and similarities of viewers' responses to Faith, Buffy and the show in general, both among and within groups, will be pertinent. Additionally, a link will be made between disparities in participants' reactions to the storyline and factors such as age, gender, and nationality, thus demonstrating some of the particular ways that the "readings" of a text such as *BtVS* are influenced by social forces.

[1] This paper focuses on audience research of *BtVS*, investigating how focus group viewers, stratified by age and gender, responded to the "Faith goes dark" storyline and its two most heavily involved characters, Buffy and Faith, and, in turn, what this set of responses says about viewers' perceptions of gender in both fictional and everyday contexts. Moreover, responses were compared and contrasted across and between groups using the social factors of gender, age, and nationality to ascertain their effect on the ways the storyline and its characters were construed by viewers: this process is based on the notion that "readings" of multifaceted, open texts such as *BtVS* are influenced by social factors. It has also been said that television shows facilitate the construction of social norms and values vis-à-vis their "recreation" of society in a fictional context (e.g. D'Acci, 2004, p. 368). In addition, scholars such as Markle claim that media representations of women act as a mechanism for the construction, reconstruction, and reification of gender identities (2008, p. 46).

[2] At the crux of this paper is the notion that television is a "polysemic" text open to various interpretations, thus "the television text is the site of struggle for meaning" (Fiske, 1987, p. 93). Similarly, Hall, in his "Encoding/Decoding" essay, maintained that readings from a text can be separated on the basis of "denotation" and "connotation": the former means "literal" and the latter represents the sub-textual interpretation. Due to the nature of denotative meanings, they tend to be inflexible universally shared readings, whereas connotative meanings are more flexible, as they are determined by readers' interpretations (pp. 168-169). Scholars including Shaun Moore have argued that audience members have a partially active role in "reading" texts, as they engage in semiotic labour (1993, p. 17). Furthermore, social factors also influence how texts are read, for "the actual television viewer is primarily a social subject" (Fiske, 1987, p. 62). To take this argument further, Morley has maintained that: "He [the hypothetical viewer]

is a subject crossed by a number of discourses"; thus the reader is influenced both by the actual text and their social values and relations (p. 143). In terms of viewers' reading *BtVS*, this author agrees with Tjardes' point that it is a "polysemic, open text available for a variety of readings by a variety of active readers" (p. 70). This essay therefore adopts the stance that viewers are active participants in reading television texts and that perceptions of a programme will vary due to the individual reader's experiences; thus an analysis of the same text by different viewers could produce asymmetrical readings.

[3] Media representations of gender can be interpreted in myriad ways by readers. In terms of *BtVS*, scholars such as Jowett have maintained that gender identity is malleable; thus gendered roles are not simply mapped onto males and females (2005, p. 4). For instance, the two slayers at the crux of the "Faith goes dark" storyline, Buffy and Faith, transgress the gendered roles prescribed for them as females. To clarify, they act outside the traditional, essentialist notions of the male-female binary: this paradigmatic gender model relies on a biological argument to purport that males, due to their physical strength and the presence of testosterone, are seen to possess traits of power and dominance, whereas females are thought to be far weaker and more emotional (Clare, 2000, p. 69). The dichotomy of male-female in the binary model exists because "masculinity does not exist in isolation from femininity" (Brittan, 1989, p. 4), thus, "gender mirrors [biological] sex or is otherwise restricted by it" (Butler, 1990, p. 6). This, therefore, means that what is culturally deemed "masculine" exists in direct opposition to "femininity"; thus to be classified male or female one must reject the traits of the opposite gender (Matteson, 1975, p. 76). It is important to remember that these are prescriptive socially constructed traits ascribed to each gender rather than innate. Pertinent to the research carried out in this paper is the convincing argument that the male-female binary model is reductionist and restrictive, as it prescribes traits and behaviour solely by biological sex (Butler, 1990, p. 6).

[4] Notably, the character of Buffy could be seen to destabilize the gender binary in a rather paradoxical fashion: she is short and thin with long, well-groomed hair, and frequently wears make-up and feminine attire; however, she also embodies "masculine" strength and authority (Jowett, 2005, p. 22). This combination of a female appearance with masculine strength has been described as an "ironic distancing from gender stereotypes" (Early, 2003, p. 58). Buttsworth has taken this argument further:

If warrior identity is simultaneously a quintessentially masculine identifier and one of the core expressions of 'innate' masculinity, then the biggest transgression of warrior iconography posed by *BtVS* is Buffy's gender. (185)

Furthermore, the empowerment Buffy possesses could be said to be more than physical, as she formulates coherent, witty comebacks and is willing to engage in "the feeble banter portion of the fight" ("Prophecy Girl" 1.12); therefore, "the language for her is a weapon" (Symonds, 2004, p. 8). Despite her transgression of gender roles, however, Buffy could be considered a "good girl" as she frequently allows herself to be dominated by masculine authority, although she sometimes refutes this by challenging the males in her life or by having violent sex with Spike (Jowett, 2005, pp. 44-45, 64-65).

[5] Conversely, the other vampire slayer Faith could be considered a "bad girl" because she transgresses the feminine ideal by behaving in a way that is excessive and highly sexualised (Jowett, 2005, p. 70). For instance, she dresses provocatively and, as a result of this, is called derogative terms like "Slut-o-Rama" ("Faith, Hope and Trick" 3.3) and "Slutbomb" ("This Year's Girl" 4.15). Moreover, Faith is extremely open about her sexual feelings: "Isn't it funny how slaying always makes you hungry and horny?" ("Faith, Hope and Trick" 3.3); she also wants emotional detachment from her sexual encounters: "Now it's strictly get some [sex], get gone" ("Revelations" 3.7). Consequently, she sees no problem in "using" men for sex (Jowett, 2005, p. 86) and is incredulous that Buffy has not "used" Xander in this way: "What are friends for? I mean, I'm sorry, it's just, all this sweating, nightly, side-by-side action, and you never put in for a little after-hours [thrusts her pelvis forward and grunts]?" ("Bad Girls" 3.14). This

attitude mirrors the doctrine of third-wave feminism which insists on women's right to sexual pleasure (see, for example, Damsky 2000; Johnson 2002). Faith derives gratification from her violent encounters with those demons and vampires she has to slay: "God I love it! When I'm fighting it's like the whole world goes away and I only know one thing—that I'm gonna win and they're gonna lose" ("Faith, Hope and Trick" 3.3). Faith's enthusiasm for violence is shown to be detrimental to herself as she becomes destructive (Forster, 2003: 14). This corresponds with Bar-On's thesis in "Violent Bodies" that violence can become compelling to women, and once they become accustomed to violence, they may "destructively" and "inhumanely" disregard the moral guidelines set out to them (2002: 73). In a similar vein, it has been said that victim feminists' motivation² for portraying women as innocent and defenseless is to conceal the fact that: "In our hearts of hearts we are not at all sure that those aggressive, dominating and violent impulses are so alien to us after all" (Wolf, 1993, p. 161). Representing the 'dark side' of women is the "seductive, compelling, violent 'bad girl'" (Wolf, 1993, p. 243). The elements of sex, violence, and rebellion are all integrated into being a 'bad girl,' and the above statement seems to sum up Faith's character in the 'Faith goes dark' storyline perfectly.

[6] Further adding to her 'bad girl' status, Faith frequently challenges authority: "I just have this problem with authority figures" ("Revelations" 3.7). While this need for independence could be seen as a progressive feminist stance, the way in which Faith is portrayed suggests that her insubordination makes her unmanageable. Although Buffy also occasionally resists authority and breaks the rules, typically she is doing it in order to perform her duty, thus exonerating her from blame; conversely, Faith is motivated by her own need for gratification, thus making her behavior unacceptable (Miller, 2003, pp. 46-47). With her extreme, violent, and uncontrollable behaviour it could be said that Faith, who is also feminine in appearance albeit in a more sexualised form than Buffy, destabilises the male-female binary in a more excessive way.

[7] Consequently, Faith is seen to be Buffy's 'dark' counterpart (see, for example, Early, 2003, p. 60; Tjardes, 2003, p. 70; Wilcox, 2005, p. 81), and has been described as "a more provocative object because she illustrates the still-precarious position of a warrior woman balanced on these borders between good and evil" (Tjardes, 2003, p. 67). Although Faith tells Buffy "You kill me, you become me" ("Enemies" 3.17) when Buffy attempts to kill Faith, Buffy does not lose her 'just warrior' status. First, the attempted murder of Faith is 'legitimized' because she poisoned Buffy's boyfriend Angel and the only cure for him is the blood of a slayer, thus it has a purpose. Second, Faith does not actually die from the stabbing and instead ends up in a long-term coma which she eventually wakes up from, meaning that Buffy has not actually killed a human being. By the end of season three, Buffy has been characterised as "responsible, restrained, and reluctant warrior woman", whereas Faith has switched from "warrior to killer" (Tjardes, 2003, p. 75-76).

[8] The conceptualizations of Buffy as a 'good girl' and 'just warrior' compared to 'bad girl' and 'killer' Faith act as a foundation for the research carried out in this paper: three focus groups were shown a screening of *BtVS* clips and thereafter engaged in discussions pertaining to the aforementioned issues. Focus groups are a research method whereby a group of individuals engage in a debate facilitated by the researcher to cover a certain theme or range of themes (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 88). Although what is discussed is shaped by the facilitator, the discussion which occurs is an immediate response and also gives an insight into how individuals respond to each other (Finch & Lewis, 2003, p. 172). The focus groups used for this research were taken from a sample of fifteen participants and differentiated by age and gender to give: Group A: Females aged eighteen to thirty; Group B: Males aged eighteen to thirty; Group C: A mixture of males and females aged thirty-one to fifty-five. Smaller groups were chosen with the goal of allowing participants to improve the complexity of their opinions (as recommended by Finch & Lewis, 2003, p. 193). However, it must be noted that a total sample size of fifteen participants is far too small to draw any sweeping conclusions from, thus meaning the research here is limited in its scope. To recruit focus group participants, information sheets detailing the purpose of the research and what was

expected of participants were distributed to those people who met the criteria for one of the three groups (i.e. being aged between eighteen to fifty-five years and not in a group of vulnerable persons). Once potential participants had expressed an interest to the researcher, consent forms specifying the rights of participants were signed and questionnaires requiring demographical information, such as nationality and religion, were completed by participants before the focus group research commenced. All participants in the three focus groups were British. Group A consisted of the following participants³: Alison, Celeste, Lacey, Lena, and Monica; all of whom were regular viewers of *BtVS*. On the contrary, in Group B, only one participant, David, was a previous viewer, whereas the rest of his group: Scott, Aidan, George and Calvin, had not watched the show previously. In group C, Harry and Roy were the only regular viewers of *BtVS*, whereas the participants Chris, Rebecca, and Alice did not watch the show. In all the focus groups, the participants had pre-existing social relationships of some description. The reasoning behind this was to create an atmosphere where participants would feel more comfortable and be able to voice their opinions. It is also said that pre-existing groups can have shared experiences, which may be beneficial to the discussion (Finch & Lewis, 2003, p. 192).

[9] The screening showed formulated clips from season three of *BtVS*. The scenes shown were:

Scene One: On the school courtyard Faith tells Buffy: "Slaying's what we were built for. If you're not enjoying it, you're doing something wrong";

Scene Two: Faith encourages Buffy to steal: "Life as a slayer is very simple. Want. Take. Have." They get arrested and then break out of the police car;

Scene Three: Faith inadvertently stabs a human being whilst patrolling with Buffy. The man dies in front of them;

Scene Four: Faith is washing her clothes in the sink when Buffy comes to visit. Buffy confronts Faith about the man's death, to which Faith replies: "You don't get it. I don't care";

(Scenes One to Four are taken from "Bad Girls" 3.14).

Scene Five: During another confrontation with Buffy, Faith insists "We don't need the law. We are the law." She states that she and Buffy are better than everyone else because people need them to survive;

Scene Six: Xander tries to reach out to Faith, who makes sexual advances towards him: "I could do anything to you right now and you want me to. I could make you scream. I could make you die." She then proceeds to strangle him;

(Scenes Five and Six are taken from "Consequences" 3.15).

Scene Seven: Faith shoots Angel with a poisoned arrow from afar. He collapses in Buffy's arms;

Scene Eight: Buffy and Faith fight climaxing in Buffy's stabbing of Faith.

(Scenes Seven and Eight are taken from "Graduation Day: Part One" 3.21).

Following the screenings, discussions within the focus groups focused on the viewers' interpretations of the characters of Buffy and Faith, as well as their more general perceptions of how females 'should' behave. Thereafter, analyses of the focus group discussions sought to decipher why participants perceived Buffy and Faith in the way they did by comparing and contrasting different social factors, such as gender, age, and nationality, both within and among the groups.

[10] Within group C, there was a definite division in opinions regarding Buffy and Faith. Three out of the five participants expressed generally negative opinions regarding Faith:

Alice: She is evil and nasty.

Rebecca: I think she loves having that amount of power, and she just wants to use it more and more to her advantage. She thinks she's better than others, she said so herself.

And

Chris: I'd definitely feel more comfortable with Buffy for sure. The other one scares me. She's just so aggressive.

The participants Alana and Chris generally refer to Faith in negative terms: "evil," "nasty" and "aggressive." Moreover, Rebecca's standpoint that Faith "thinks she's better than others" implies that Faith's 'masculine' persona gives her a reason to believe that she possesses part of what De Beauvoir calls "[metaphorical] phallic superiority," which is artificially contrived by society (1953, p. 428). The possible assumption is that Faith embraces the notions of power and aggression to gain this "phallic superiority."

[11] On the other hand, the remaining participants, Harry and Roy, both male and the youngest in the group, initially have a different opinion of Faith:

Harry: She's [Faith] more exciting.

Roy: Yeah, Buffy's nice, but the other one's kinda naughty [cheeky smile] and wild.

[They discuss who is better-looking.]

To Harry and Roy, Faith represents a sexualised deviant creature conflated with 'excitement' and 'naughtiness,' thus appealing to them solely (insofar as they expressed their motives) for that reason. It could be said that Faith's provocative clothing and overt sexuality, which are highlighted on-screen, provide strong visual and erotic impact for the two heterosexual male participants Harry and Roy. This adheres to the feminist film theory of the "male gaze" in which the viewers can perceive characters through the eyes of a heterosexual male. Mulvey explains it as:

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (1975, p. 33)

In addition to this, Harry and Roy laughed throughout various points in the screening of the 'Faith goes dark' storyline: when cop says to Faith "Spread 'em" and she replies "You wish"; when Faith says to Xander: "You'd dig that, wouldn't you? To get up in front of all your geek pals and go on record about how I made you my boy toy for a night," and then throws him on to the bed; when Faith says "Give us a kiss" to Buffy and they begin to fight.

[12] Despite these responses, however, later on in the focus group discussion, the two men described Faith in the following way:

Roy: Faith didn't really show any emotion for what she'd just done. Buffy was kinda upset cause [sic] the accident with the guy, hereas the other one [Faith] didn't care. She was just like: "I've just killed the guy, [it] doesn't matter."

Harry: Faith's more aggressive. She's XXY: she looks like a woman but acts more like a man.

Roy: You'd be scared if you got her in a bad mood she'd end up giving you a doin' [beat you up].

And

Harry: She's on a power trip. I think it's [be]cause women are more unpredictable than men [as] they are subject to hormonal fluctuations.

And

Roy: Faith is a bit too scary for me.

Despite their earlier comments about Faith being “exciting” and “naughty,” in this exchange, Harry asserted that she was on “a power trip” and more “aggressive,” whilst Roy described her as “scary” and also expressed a fear that she would act belligerently if in a bad mood. What this suggests is that whilst Faith may appeal to them initially for her overt sexuality and her extreme behavior, in a real-life context she would be less appealing due to her excessively belligerent nature. This response indicates a discrepancy between what is attractive on a television programme, i.e. a fictional context, where Faith is able to be desired by men and her extreme behavior and comments provide amusement, and what is attractive in a reality, where someone like Faith is perceived negatively because of her aggression and need for power. This exchange also highlights that the perception of gender by these two males is predicated on the male-female binary model. For instance, Roy’s initial comment shows an immediate connection between femininity and emotion, which adheres to the stereotypical gendered roles ascribed onto biological sexes. Similarly, Harry’s reasoning that Faith’s unpredictability could be attributed to women’s “hormonal fluctuations” is also predicated on a biological argument. Additionally, Harry’s earlier point that Faith is a hybrid of male (XY) personality traits and female appearance (XX) once again draws upon the binary model to ascertain how males behave and how females look; it is also similar to arguments made in the literature (see, for example, Buttsworth 2002; Early 2003; Jowett 2005) about the paradoxical nature of the slayers possessing a masculine, warrior nature alongside a feminine appearance.

[13] To sum up, the division within focus group C with regards to the character of Faith was predicated on gender, as the females in the group reacted with absolute negativity to her, whereas the males of the group—except for the oldest group member Chris—initially claimed she was the more exciting character. Perhaps Chris was influenced by his own real-life experiences of women behaving in a similar fashion to Faith in the workplace:

Women have to try harder and, quite often, it’s a persona they put on. They feel they’ve got to be harder, more aggressive—either on the corporate ladder or [in] their personal lives. The persona they give out is unacceptable to males who don’t expect that. It’s because of the male perception that the females think they have to put it on. I can see the reason why Faith acts like that in that she’s got the power.

What can be deduced from this statement is that women are adopting a ‘masculine’ persona in order to be successful in society, which is purported to be ‘unacceptable’ to males. This complements Wolf’s theory that:

It is not men with power who behave in individualistic, defensively competitive ways; it is the few women with power who tend to do so. (p. 311)

[14] These perceptions are perhaps based on the previous viewership of *BtVS* too, for Harry and Roy were regular viewers of the show, so their opinions were likely to be based on Faith as displayed over the course of *BtVS* as a whole, whereas Alana, Rebecca, and Chris had only watched the screening. That said, the females in group A were previous viewers of the show—meaning they had watched Faith’s subsequent redemption—yet only had negative comments to make about her. Some of these are evident in this exchange:

Alison: I wouldn’t say Faith is strong.

Monica: She’s dominant.

Alison: Look at the way she shoots at Angel she’s, like, far away; she doesn’t go up to his face and confront him. So, yeah, she may be strong in the very overt sense that she’s able to kill a man and dominate in bed, but she’s actually just a coward otherwise. Buffy is a strong character [as] she wants them to face up to what they’ve done. She said no and Faith still

stabbed him.

Lacey: I know! She had loads of time to stop.

Alison: I suppose that was maybe going back into what she'd [Faith] said before about how she enjoyed it and got a buzz out of it.

Therefore, the fact that all seven females in the research sample reacted negatively to Faith suggests that many women are unable to identify with Faith. It could be said that this is similar to the situation within the diegesis of *BtVS*, where Faith is disliked by the main female characters on the show, such as Willow, Tara, and Cordelia, and even her relationship with Buffy is not particularly close, with the exception, perhaps, of the "Bad Girls" episode (3.14).

[15] Buffy, however, is viewed in a positive light by the females in groups A and C. In Group A, there was the following exchange:

Alison: There are other female characters in it that I would say... Willow, for example, she's very geeky and shy and quite willing to let people dominate and I would say Buffy is the balance between that and Faith. She doesn't roll over and take it, she goes after Faith and she doesn't lose it.

Celeste: I prefer Buffy. She's a slayer for no other reason than to help people. Like you were saying she is capable of being tough and standing up for herself.

And

Alison: Buffy has power too but she doesn't abuse it, whereas Faith is the abusive power....She's [Buffy] doing everything in the interest of justice. Faith got too much enjoyment out of it, like [it was] a hobby.

Alison's idea that Buffy is the "*balance*" between Faith and Willow mirrors Wilcox's argument that if these three characters were set up on a continuum Buffy would be in the centre with Faith to her far left and Willow to the far right (2005, p. 49). It seems that Buffy's ability to show emotions and her strength of character makes her the more preferable character compared to her extremely out-of-control counterpart Faith as well as to her "geeky" and "shy" friend Willow. Additionally, Alison's idea of Faith holding the "abusive power" corresponds with Bar-On's theory in 'Violent Bodies' that when women become accustomed to violence their morals degenerate. Similarly, the females in group C announce their preference for Buffy:

Rebecca: I prefer Buffy because she's good.

Alana: Yeah.

It can, therefore, be deduced that females must be able to relate to Buffy in some way that they cannot with Faith. It perhaps relates to Jowett's conceptualizations of "good girls" and "bad girls" with the former perceived as the norm because it adheres to the hegemonic ideal of male authority dominating. This is definitely evident in *BTVS*, where the Watchers' Council—a predominantly masculine body—dictates Buffy's slaying activities on several occasions until she finally stands up to them in "Checkpoint" (5.12). This deduction is backed up in a statement made by a female in group A:

Alison: I think in the beginning Faith's kind of cool because Buffy's quite straight-laced and, even though she's the Slayer and everything, she's conventional. Buffy's [also] geeky and hangs about with misfit people. She doesn't even try and break the rules, [whereas] Faith is quite cool when she first comes in and she's a rebel.

[16] Interestingly, the group of young males viewed Faith in a mainly negative light as per the other two groups, but there was a division in the way they perceived Buffy. To begin with, the group described Faith in the following way:

David: She's a bitch.

Scott: She lies to protect herself.

Aidan: She deserved to die.

With the exception of David, this group has not watched *BtVS* before, so their interpretation of Faith is based solely on the clips they saw. There was an interesting distinction made between Faith and Buffy by Aidan:

There's no one there to supervise her [Faith], or a group of friends or anything like Buffy's got.

And

She [Faith] is a strong woman; she can stand herself without a support network.

This commentary implies that Faith needs some kind of supervision to restrain her, whereas Buffy thrives from being interdependent. This view mirrors Miller's theory that it is the way Faith is portrayed that denotes her as unmanageable (p. 47). This assessment is also backed up by later comments made by participants in group B:

David: Faith's irresponsible.

Aidan: Buffy's not as consumed with the power as Faith was.

David: She was getting led astray by Faith to an extent, but then she drew the line when Faith killed the guy.

In addition to this, some participants in the group thought Buffy was a likeable character:

David: For the most part, I think Buffy's a positive role model. She does have laws even though they sometimes conflict with her purpose. She does have convictions once she decides to do something.

Aidan: Although she's a strong personality, she still does have emotion, whereas Faith never had that emotion.

[17] Conversely, some of the other participants in that group were critical of Buffy:

George: I would say Buffy is more impressionable. It has to be something catastrophic that happens in her life before she turns around and does back to others what they do to her.

Scott: So, Buffy is fitting the [profile of the] more stereotypical female. Faith is giving out the orders and she's just following them.

And

Scott: Women should be empowered, but it should be without violence.

And

Calvin: I would say that Buffy is quite one-dimensional. Faith is a deeper character.

The division within this group with regards to their perceptions of Buffy is interesting. David and Aidan construe Buffy as a "positive role model" and "strong" woman, whereas they deem Faith to lack "emotion" and be "irresponsible." This response suggests a nexus between Buffy's handling her power in a more controlled fashion and still

displaying emotion in comparison to Faith who abstains from showing emotion and abuses the power she wields; in other words, Buffy is still adhering to 'good girl' doctrine by not using her power to alleviate her status in society, as well as fulfilling the women-are-more-emotional requirement of the male-female binary model. Conversely, the other three participants of that group believe that Buffy is "impressionable," "one-dimensional" and fitting the profile of the "more stereotypical female" by "following" Faith's orders. What can be deduced from this is that Buffy is perceived negatively for not standing up to Faith at an earlier point in the storyline screened to participants. In addition, participant Scott adopts the position that "women should be empowered without violence," illustrating disapproval of both Buffy and Faith. The reasons for the divisions are not immediately clear since the participants in this group are all British males of a young age (eighteen to thirty), giving them no obvious heterogeneity. After further investigation, it was discovered that Scott was the only participant who stated a religious affiliation on his pre-focus group questionnaire: his religion could possibly have influenced his anti-violence stance. In the case of the three participants that are critical of Buffy in comparison to the two who speak positively about her, it is likely that these differences are attributable to the way participants view gender (see the section above on gender views). Moreover, it is important to remember that the way gender is construed is predicated on individuals' social values and beliefs, which are influenced by social forces: one's family, peers and friends, the type of education they received, the type of media they consume, their own personal experiences, and so forth. Therefore, future investigative research is required to completely ascertain why all focus group participants interpret gender in their own individual way.

[18] With regards to *BtVS* as a show, participants' responses were once again revealing. In group A, the moral implications of the 'Faith goes dark' storyline were debated:

Alison: I think it's to show you could become like Faith—everyone's got that in them—and I've read once you kill the taboo is taken away.

Lacey: It's like cheating. Once you've crossed a line-

Alison: Yeah, once you've got away with it once, you'll do it again.

Lacey: [Because] it wasn't what they built it up to be in their heads.

What is illuminating about that exchange is the way participants are able to switch between the fictional world of *BtVS* and reality, in order to extract themes that are relevant in everyday life. The malleable nature of reality was also evident in Chris's real-life experience of women in the workplace, as well as in the way participants in all focus groups discussed Buffy and Faith as though they were real-life people. Although this is perhaps attributable to the fact that the quality of the writing on *BtVS* makes the characters appear realistic to a certain extent, it does demonstrate how audiences are able to engage with television shows, interpret the themes and characters in myriad ways, and then apply them to their everyday lives. The phenomenon also highlights the need for further research involving audiences and their interpretations of fictional media forms.

[19] In addition to this, a comment made by a participant in group B about *BtVS* is revealing in terms of gendered roles:

George: I've got to admit in all the years, I have never really known that [BtVS] to get hauled through for its violence, but whether this is because there are women heroines in it, I don't know.

The suggestion that *BtVS* has never been deemed to be a violent show (a mistaken assertion) because the main protagonists are females insinuates that its violence is dismissed for the very reason that females are perpetrating it, thus making it too

unrealistic to be of any concern. This idea of female action heroes as unrealistic is taken further in a comment by a participant Celeste:

You don't usually see women fight back and everything—in a situation like that they would usually just go to the police.

Given the number of television shows with female protagonists who “fight back” either through violence or other means like magic, such as *Alias*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Charmed*, *Dark Angel* and *La Femme Nikita*, this pattern suggests that audiences are either watching this type of show precisely because they are unrealistic, ergo making the series something fresh and interesting to watch, or because they view it as a metaphor for female empowerment. Participant George in group B gives credence to the metaphorical explanation:

You have got women out there who are violent in their opinions: I think that is what the violence on Buffy is meant to portray. I think it's definitely voices and opinions of feminism. I would say Faith, probably, is the more aggressive form. She's in there and it's all for female rights; and [then] you've got Buffy which is the more lenient form and equality for both man and woman kind of thing.

In this comparison, Buffy represents the 'power feminism' doctrine (see Wolf 1993), which emphasizes equality with men, whereas Faith represents a more radical form of feminism that proclaims superiority over others.

[20] Two participants in group C could not identify with *BtVS* as a show for the following reasons:

Chris: It's very Americanized. Honest to God, I couldn't imagine this in a European setting. Everyone's persona is very American and aggressive—nearly everyone there [in that clip] was aggressive to me.

Rebecca: Yes, I wouldn't watch it on a regular basis as it's very violent and American.

This exchange highlights the cultural differences between *BtVS*, as an American show, and the British participants here. Describing the show as “American” and “Americanized” and conflating this Americanization with violence and aggression suggests these participants have preconceived notions of the United States. Clearly, this is a problematic assumption to make because it positions the nation as a homogenous entity; and describing something as “American” is reductive and parochial because it fails to consider the fact that *BtVS* has a global fan base, as well as people from various countries involved in the show. This commentary highlights the effect that viewers' preconceived notions of a nation can have on the way they construe its television shows. Additionally, watching a television show could reinforce these notions, which the violence in *BtVS* seems to have done in the case of Chris and Rebecca; however, it is also possible that viewing a television show could refute them, too.

[21] To conclude, this audience research has demonstrated that participants construed the 'Faith goes dark' storyline in numerous ways. A commonality was that all seven female participants in the sample demonstrated strong dislike for Faith and admiration for Buffy; this set of responses suggests that females in general can relate to Buffy in some way that they cannot with Faith. Moreover, for group A (young females who were all previous viewers of *BtVS*) Buffy was seen as the ideal balance between domination and submission, especially compared to other female characters in the show such as Faith and Willow. This group seemed to reach a consensus in the way they viewed the characters of Buffy and Faith and *BtVS* in general. Conversely, although all the participants in group B (young male participants) disliked Faith, there was an evident division in opinion within the group with regards to the character of Buffy. On the one hand, two of them praised Buffy and claimed she was a good role model, and also raised the paradoxical argument that Buffy is strong because of her self-reliance,

whereas Faith needs supervision. The remaining three participants of group B, however, were critical of Buffy for being "impressionable," "one-dimensional" and "fitting the profile of the stereotypical female by following Faith's orders." This division in opinion is likely attributable to the way participants perceive gender, suggesting that for the first two participants Buffy's independence and emotion make her an acceptable female character, but for the remaining three participants a balance between Faith and Buffy would represent a progressive female role model.

[22] Likewise, in group C, there was another division in opinion with regards to Faith. To clarify, three participants (two females and one male) interpreted the character of Faith negatively, whereas the remaining two younger male participants claimed to prefer her for being "exciting" and "naughty." However, later on in the discussion, these two males speak about Faith in terms such as "aggressive" and "scary." What this shift in opinion suggests is that in a fictional context like *BtVS*, someone as extreme and sexually overt as Faith is fun to watch and appealing to perhaps younger heterosexual males, but in a real-life situation she would be considered too violent—and "masculine" as one of men described her—to be deemed acceptable.

[23] With regards to *BtVS* itself, the participants were able to interpret its themes and then apply them to real-life situations, as well as construe possible metaphors prevalent in the show. It was further found that viewers' preconceived notions about the country where a show is produced can affect how they interpret it; moreover, viewing the show can also reinforce—or possibly refute—these notions. However, given its small sample size and particular focus on Faith and Buffy, this research paper is only a snapshot of audience interaction with *BtVS*, and thus is very limited in the claims it can make. Further research is needed in this area to allow for deeper examinations into the reasons why viewers interpret *BtVS* and its characters the way they do. An interesting project for future research would be to show all the participants—even those who have previously viewed the series—clips of Faith's redemption to see if their opinion of her changed at all; additionally, they could also view the sixth season of *BtVS* when Buffy herself becomes quite a dark character. How would their gendered roles be interpreted then?

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Notes

¹ Hereafter referred to as *BtVS*.

² "Victim feminists" is a term used by Naomi Wolf to denote a specific type of feminism, one which advocates that "feminine specialness" makes women "superior." Wolf (1993, p. 147) views this as transgressive because victim feminism occurs when "a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness." It is further maintained by Wolf that this type of feminist arose due to society's failure to grant females complete equality.

³ Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.