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Viewers' Interpretations of the Buffy and Spike Relationship in Season 6

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Introduction

Various *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*) scholars have documented the transgression of traditional "femininity" by the main female protagonists in the show. Lorna Jowett's 2005 book *Sex and the Slayer* and Selina Doran's 2012 audience study both found that Buffy is positioned as a "good girl" in her behaviors and personality, as opposed to Faith's "bad girl" character.[1] This paper will examine how viewers, most of whom are not regular viewers of *BtVS*, interpret Buffy in Season 6 of the show when she takes on "bad girl" attributes by having a sexual relationship with the vampire, Spike. The storyline of this relationship was traced through the following episodes: "Checkpoint" (5.12), featuring an argument between Buffy and Spike; "Crush" (5.14), where Buffy finds out about Spike's feelings for her; "Afterlife" (6.3), documenting Spike's emotional reaction to Buffy's resurrection; "Smashed" (6.9), marking the beginning of Buffy's sexual relationship with Spike; "Dead Things" (6.13), where Buffy has sex with Spike in The Bronze nightclub whilst watching her friends and then reacting violently towards him when she mistakenly believes she has killed someone; "As You Were" (6.15), showing Buffy end her relationship with Spike; "Entropy" (6.18), with Spike encouraging Buffy to tell her friends about their relationship and also Buffy telling Spike he needs to move on; "Seeing Red" (6.19), featuring Dawn telling Spike that he hurt Buffy by sleeping with Anya and then a scene where Buffy is

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sexually assaulted by Spike. A screening of the storyline beginning with Buffy's finding out about Spike's feelings for her through to the attempted rape scene was shown to three focus groups: one with older adults aged between 59-70 of both genders; one with females only and a broad age range of 21 to 63; another with males only and a broad age range from 23 to 71. Participants were British. Age and gender were key variables in stratifying the groups, with the purpose of measuring any differences based on social factors. The discussion then centered on the nature of Spike and Buffy's relationship, domestic abuse, sexual violence, and gender roles. Findings indicate that the traditional male-female binary model (see Butler) is rudimentary, given participants' reactions to the characters of Buffy and Spike. Analyses of the results were informed by the wider literature on gender, domestic violence, and rape scripts, as well as other *BtVS* studies.[2]

This paper will firstly provide context to the rationale behind audience research and discuss the methodology used. Results from focus groups will then be discussed: an overview of feelings about the show; a debate over whether Buffy is vulnerable or a manipulator in her relationship with Spike; arguments attributing blame to Spike as well as alternative ones showing sympathy for him are outlined. A conclusion bringing together all these thoughts will then be provided.

The purpose of this paper was to explore focus groups viewers' reactions to Buffy and gender roles more generally; an abusive relationship (from both sides); criminality (Buffy physically assaults Spike, but turns herself in when she believes she has killed someone; Spike has killed before, but feels guilty about the attempted rape of Buffy); the realism of the characters, as well as the domestic abuse/sexual violence storyline; and the extent to which viewers blame Buffy for the attempted rape or view her as a victim.

The most effective research method to achieve this goal was deemed to be focus groups: a group of individuals actively engage in a debate facilitated by the researcher (Bloor et al.). To this end, a screening of the storyline was shown to group participants, and this provided the basis for discussion, along with some reference points put together by the researcher. It was felt that focus groups were the more effective method for generating results about reactions to the characters, as well as highlighting notable differences based on social factors such as nationality, gender, and age. Dallas W. Smythe noted that "audience members act on the program content. They take it and mould it in the image of their individual needs and values" (143). Extrapolating from this, those watching television clips actively interpret explicit and latent meanings and relate them to their own belief systems. This means that viewers of the same clips could have completely different reactions.

Literature Review

The representation of gender roles in *BtVS* is something that has been explored by a number of scholars (see, for example, Buttsworth; Doran; Jowett; Schultz; Symonds, "Solving Problems with Sharp Objects"). Since "masculinity does not exist in isolation from femininity" (Brittan 4), social conditions shape the nature and definitions of gender (Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime*). Within this binary model, what is deemed "masculine" exists in direct opposition to what is construed as "feminine." To this end, each gender must reject the traits of the other (Matteson 76). According to sex role theory, females are expected to be docile, emotional and submissive; whereas males are believed to be aggressive, dominant, and stoic.

Hyper-masculinity, entrenched in leadership, dominance, and physical strength, is an even more extreme form of what it means to be man (Mosher and Sirkin; Mosher and Tomkins). Moreover, structured action theory maintains that committing violent crime is a way of "doing . . . gender" (Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime* 3). Notably, this mainly applies to masculinity, since the role of the female in criminality has been under-reported in the literature, further serving to portray women as solely "victims" in the process (Naffin). The reliance on essentialist arguments rooted in biological interpretations of male aggression and strength compared to female submissiveness render sex role theory rather reductive and restrictive. A more progressive approach to gender roles is to acknowledge that gender is fluid and variable (Butler), with there being multiple interpretations of what constitutes masculinity and femininity (Connell). In this sense, the conceptualization of gender is an ongoing project: "[Gender] is never a static or finished product" (Messerschmidt, "Masculinities, Crime, and Prison" 67).

The reading of *BtVS* as a feminist text has been the subject of debate for numerous scholars (see, for example, Buttsworth; Byers; Early; Jowett; Pender; Schultz). To begin with, the idea that the Slayer is always a female directly epitomizes the point of second wave feminism: "Power is not the natural property of men; woman should wield it as well" (Pender 35). It could thus be argued that Slayers represent the "monstrous-feminine," trading places with the monster by killing it with a phallic object (Creed 36). The character of Buffy herself is a "contradiction" in gender: she has a feminine appearance, but the physical prowess of a man (Buttsworth; Early; Symonds "Solving Problems with Sharp Objects"). This adheres to the vision of third-wave feminists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, arguing that equality does not mean that one must shun make-up, styled hair and fashion (see Pender). Moreover, Buffy challenges patriarchy in the form of the almost all-male Watchers Council, an institution set up to control the behavior of slayers. This adheres to one of the goals of second-wave feminism to challenge existing power structures (Pender 35). Despite this, *BtVS* does not address the third-wave feminism aim of economic and racial equality, since the character of Buffy is white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle-class (Byers 179). The only time it could be argued that transnational feminism is achieved is the final episode of *BtVS*, in which her power is shared with other "potential slayers" from various backgrounds all over the world (Pender 58). The way Buffy acts in her personal relationships is also an area for analysis in relation to feminism and representations of gender roles; this is the subject of debate in this paper.

Data Collection

The storyline of interest in this paper's examination of gender roles was the abusive relationship between Buffy and Spike. Although there are a few scenes from Season 5 of *BtVS* to provide context to the storyline, the main focus is on Season 6, commonly referred to as "dark" (Edwards, Rambo, and South 6).[3] This is the period in the show when the character of Buffy goes through a fundamental change. Having been brought back from the dead by her friends, Buffy occupies the "status between living and dying forms" (Erickson and Lemberg 116). Coupled with her inability to feel emotions, she embarks on a sexual relationship with Spike. Within this, Buffy is shown to be the "sexual aggressor," often taking the top position in scenes of their having sex; whilst Spike is the "verbal aggressor," using words to express his desire and thoughts (Heinecken 3, 27). When the chip in Spike's head preventing him from inflicting harm to humans works on monsters but no longer works on Buffy, she then questions whether she has returned in a monstrous form. Rhonda V.Wilcox has argued that "Buffy *wants* to see her body as monstrous in order to justify her connection to Spike and her own violent, sexual predilections—both of which help her feel" ("Set on This Earth" 98). This paper interrogates how viewers read the latent meanings of the relationship between Buffy and Spike. It was particularly important to show the scene that "ended" their relationship in its current form: Spike's attempted rape of Buffy. *BtVS* scholar Angie Burns has theorized that this act is an attempt to make Buffy "feel" something for him (13).

The focus groups were shown a number of scenes from different episodes of *BtVS*, split into three parts:

Part One: Introduction to characters

- Scene One: Spike tries to rescue Buffy from a vampire and they get into an argument ("Checkpoint" 5.12, 12:33-14:12).
- Scene Two: Buffy finds out about Spike's crush and rejects him, closing the door to her home in his face ("Crush" 5.14, 17:12-22:20, 41:12-41:54).

Part Two: Relationship

- Scene One: Buffy dies and then Buffy's friends talk about bringing her back to life and Buffy crawls out of her grave (taken from "Previously on *Buffy*" segments from "Bargaining Part One" 6.1, 1:24-1:59 and "Afterlife" 6.3, 0:12-0:28).
- Scene Two: Spike sees Buffy in her home for the first time since she died and tells her she has been dead for 147 days ("Afterlife" 6.3, 6:38-8:47).
- Scene Three: Spike cries outside and has a confrontation with Xander about why he was not told about the plan to resurrect Buffy ("Afterlife" 6.3, 10:59-12:24).

- Scene Four: Spike taunts Buffy that she has "come back wrong" since he can now hit her without feeling pain. Buffy and Spike engage in a fight and then start kissing ("Smashed" 6.9, 34:34-35:30, 37:28-38:47, 39:20-40:01).
- Scene Five: Buffy and Spike have sex on balcony of *The Bronze* whilst she watches her friends ("Dead Things" 6.13, 19:27-21:27).
- Scene Six: A brief discussion with the Evil Trio is shown, with Warren saying Buffy thinks she has killed Katrina. Buffy beats up Spike outside police station, as she tries to turn herself in, mistakenly believing she has killed a girl ("Dead Things" 6.13, 27:58-28:30, 33:03-36:00).

Part Three: The relationship ends

- Scene One: Buffy breaks up with Spike ("As You Were" 6.15, 38:59-40:48).
- Scene Two: Spike says to Buffy "Tell your friends about us" and her denying that she loves him ("Entropy" 6.18, 02:03-03:07).
- Scene Three: Buffy asks Spike about camera hidden in her front lawn ("Entropy" 6.18, 21:16-22:51).
- Scene Four: Dawn tells Spike he hurt Buffy by sleeping with Anya ("Seeing Red" 6.19, 12:02-13:56).
- Scene Five: Spike tries to rape Buffy; the aftermath is briefly shown, with Buffy lying on the floor as Xander finds her; Spike feels guilty, having flashbacks and smashing a glass ("Seeing Red" 6.19, 22:28-25:25, 28:14-28:57, 29:46-30:14).

A discussion followed each part of the storyline in order to gauge participants' reactions to the characters of Buffy and Spike, their thoughts on the relationship and relating this to gender roles and criminality. The differences and similarities in opinion within focus groups were of interest, as were those between the different focus groups. This allowed for a deeper interrogation of whether age, gender, and other social forces played a role in influencing perceptions of this storyline and the show overall.

The research method used was "focus groups," where between four to eight individuals engage in a debate covering a certain theme (Bloor and Wood 88). Focus groups were deemed the most useful research method to measure the reactions of individuals, as well as to determine "the normative understandings that groups draw upon to reach their collective judgments" (Bloor et al. 4). The role of the facilitator is pertinent in shaping the discussion (Bloor et al.), whilst the way the discussion flows between individual participants gives it a spontaneous nature (Finch and Lewis 172).

Due to the time and resources available, recruitment for focus groups was done through existing connections. Potential participants were selected to fit into three groups: mixed gender, older adults; males, various ages; females, various ages. This is "stratified purposive sampling," whereby samples must be relatively heterogeneous to allow for comparisons (Ritchie et al. 79). The reasoning behind this sampling strategy was that it would allow for inferences to be made about the impact of age and gender on viewers' perceptions, especially if there were debates within groups. Once potential participants had shown interest in taking part in the study, an information sheet and consent form were provided to them for review. Upon receiving their informed consent, participants were then given questionnaires asking about socio-demographic factors like age, gender, and nationality. Whether participants had previously watched the show was also recorded in the questionnaires to allow for inferences to be made about whether this could have affected their reaction to the storyline. Prior to the focus groups, I had the preconceptions that fans were more likely to have background context and be more sympathetic to the characters. I also believed that the males would probably dislike Spike when they saw the sexual assault, and the females would perhaps be able to relate more to Buffy than the other focus groups would. My first two assumptions were proven correct; yet the final one was surprising in the sense that females were critical of Buffy to some extent and did have some sympathy for Spike.

Eight participants were recruited for each of the three focus groups. Two participants cancelled in both the male and female groups, leaving a final total of twenty participants. Details about socio-demographic characteristics and previous viewing of *BtVS* have been recorded in three tables for each of the groups below. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Females, Various Ages

Name	**Age**	**Nationality**	**Religion**	**Education**	**Previous *BtVS* viewer**
Gemma	25	Scottish	None	Postgraduate	A couple of times
Maria	63	British	Church of Scotland	Degree level	A couple of times
Liz	21	Scottish	None	College level	Regular viewer
Jenny	55	British	None	Postgraduate	Never watched it
Karen	45	English	None	Postgraduate	Never watched it
Angela	28	British	Christian	College level	Never watched it

Males, Various Ages

Name	**Age**	**Nationality**	**Religion**	**Education**	**Previous *BtVS* viewer**
Liam	59	British	None	Postgraduate	Occasional viewer
Andy	62	Scottish	None	Postgraduate	Never watched it
Sean	71	British	None	Postgraduate	Never watched it
Daniel	23	Scottish	None	Postgraduate	Never watched it
Craig	23	Scottish	None	College level	Occasional viewer
Brian	28	British	Catholic	Degree level	Occasional viewer

Mixed gender, Older Adults

Name	**Gender**	**Age**	**Nationality**	**Religion**	**Education**	**Previous *BtVS* viewer**
Kathy	Female	59	British	Protestant	Postgraduate	Never watched it
Olivia	Female	66	British	Presbyterian	None	Never watched it
Ruth	Female	68	British	Christian	College level	Never watched it
Rob	Male	70	British	Ex-Christian	Degree level	Never watched it
Gordon	Male	67	English	Church of England	Degree level	Never watched it
Michaela	Female	61	British	None	None	Never watched it
Nigel	Male	66	British	Church of England	Degree level	Never watched it
Mike	Male	68	British	Church of England	Degree level	Never watched it

It has been recommended that focus groups in which participants are known to each other can have shared experiences that may be beneficial to the discussion (Finch and Lewis 192). For that reason, there were pre-existing connections at all of the focus groups to create an atmosphere where participants were able to voice their opinions.

Analysis

Focus groups were audio-recorded and thereafter transcribed. As Michael Bloor and Fiona Wood maintained, doing so "captures and freezes in time the spoken discourse" (166). Transcripts were thereafter analyzed using a process of "open coding," in which similar fragments of data are grouped into categories and assigned codes to serve as descriptors (Boeije 96-98). The pre-defined topic areas for the focus group discussions (see Appendix at the end of this paper) facilitated the broad groupings of categories: sexual deviancy, gender roles, domestic abuse, criminality and overall thoughts on *BtVS* as a television show. To assist with this initial process of analysis, the computer program *NVivo* was used which allows for "nodes" (analytical categories) to be created (Gibbs 307). The process of creating "nodes" is entirely dependent on the researcher's analysis, for "the computer does not make conceptual decisions, such as which words or themes are important to focus on, or which analytic step to take next" (Tesch 25-26).

Building upon this initial stage of analysis, the next stage is "axial coding" where fragments are checked to determine whether new codes are needed or if categories need to be merged (Boeije 108). This secondary stage of analysis allowed for the emerging themes to be finalized. Also of interest was the debate emerging between participants, with areas of conflict and agreement being extracted from the transcripts for further analyses. The overview of the findings in the next section of this paper has tried to document the most evident instances of disagreement and accordance. When reporting the results, any questions or comments made by the focus group facilitator will be italicized to distinguish these words from the remainder of the discussion.

Findings

Audience Reactions to BtVS

The results from focus group participants' feelings regarding the show itself will firstly be discussed. Despite there being some criticisms about the level of violence and possible impact of the show on younger viewers (more on this later), the female focus group were the most positive about *BtVS*. This reaction is perhaps unsurprising given that three of the participants had previously watched the show and one had a teenage daughter who used to watch it. Participants maintained that the television show was quite appealing:

> **Karen:** It seems a bit glamorous and edgy in a way. They're doing these amazing things, they're good-looking.
>
> **Maria:** At the time it was quite innovative. There wasn't anything like that.
>
> **Liz:** I liked it a lot when I was younger because of the strong female characters. Not necessarily physically but they were confident in themselves. In high school, she wasn't a popular girl, so that attracted me to it and the fact that she was able to protect herself. I feel like that's a good message to send out to girls.
>
> **Karen:** I can actually really see the appeal of it. I can see why you would almost get hooked on it. It's addictive.

In direct contrast to the females, the majority of participants in the focus group of males described *BtVS* as superficial, unrealistic, and stereotypical in nature. The exchange below gives an indication of their feelings about it:

> ***Selina:** Is this the kind of thing you would usually watch?*
>
> **Andy:** By no means.
>
> **Brian:** I've got some friends who watched it. I'm now questioning their taste in TV shows.

Moreover, the sixty-two year-old participant, Andy, commented that age might play a part in his feelings towards the show: "I'm seeing this as an old man now. I might have enjoyed it 30/40 years ago, just not my cup of tea now." The younger participants in the male focus group actually said the violence was tame in comparison to other television shows like *True Blood* (2008-2014), *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016). Further, these younger males said they were actually "desensitized" to violence, due to their regular viewing of more violent shows. The only male participants who were positive about the show were the previous viewers:

> **Liam:** That's not really a typical episode.
>
> **Craig:** You're right. I have seen the odd complete episode here and there. There are more scenes where there's fun.
>
> **Liam:** And laughter.

The focus group of older adults strongly disliked *BtVS*, probably even more than the male group. To begin with, there were no previous viewers of the show, because it either had not appealed to them or they believed it was for children. After watching the storyline, participants described the show as far-fetched and not something they would ever watch or be keen for their children to view. The sentiment of the group is exemplified in this exchange:

> **Ruth:** I don't know if I would have taken as much out of it. I would have watched it and been like "Oh, I don't like this very much. It's a waste of time."
>
> **Mike:** I'm the same. I would look at it and turn it off.
>
> **Michaela:** I would think it was the same as those slasher horror films and just turn it off.

An interesting point to arise from discussions about *BtVS* from all the focus groups was that the show felt very "American." For instance, the female focus group made a similar point about "glamorizing everything" being the American style of television shows. In order to explicate this point, participant Jenny referred to *Being Human* (2008-2013) as the British equivalent of *BtVS:* "It had a sense of humor and explored relationships. It didn't glamorize violence in the way this does." There was a similar finding in my previous audience research study (Doran), where British participants felt that the show was "very American" and "violent." The "glamorization of violence" noted by female focus group participants is something which could be of particular concern if shown to audiences in different countries. Similarly, the violent nature of the show was linked with it being American by the group of older adults:

> **Kathy:** To me, this hitting people seems very American.
>
> ***Selina:*** *Do you think it's an American TV show?*
>
> **Olivia:** A hundred percent.
>
> **Kathy:** Very, very. All the effects and killing people was all American.

The use of "American" within this context is a broad, all-encompassing term, which does not really capture the nuances and variations in culture within the United States. What it does show, however, is that audiences are reacting to the show with perceived values and norms for American culture. Furthermore, given the fact that all the participants identified their nationality as British or Scottish or English, this demonstrates the impact cultural differences may have had on their viewing of the show.[4]

Another thread of debate was whether or not there would be a British television show as "extreme" as *BtVS*. The following exchange took place in the female focus group:

> **Gemma:** In Britain, there wouldn't be anything as extreme as that. Maybe I'm just biased.
>
> ***Selina:*** *Well, you would see something like that in a soap [opera].*
>
> **Jenny:** I suppose soaps do try and deal with issues sensitively; whereas this [the attempted rape storyline] was almost crisis management by the producers.
>
> **Gemma:** I wonder if it just reflected the times though. Nothing like that had been out before, but maybe they didn't know how to deal with it.

The focus group of male participants also made similar points. Participant Andy described the show as "very American" and saying that it would be difficult to imagine something similar on British television. This was backed up by another participant, Liam, who claimed that the closest thing to this storyline would be the most extreme "late-night" specials of British soap opera, *Hollyoaks* (1995-present): these focus on fewer characters and involve more sexual and violent content than "regular" episodes.

Buffy and Spike's Relationship

There was general consensus among all the focus groups that the relationship between Buffy and Spike was abusive in nature, both physically and emotionally. In the focus group of older adults (mixed gender), one of the participants, Gordon, immediately raised the issue of "domestic violence":

> **Gordon:** Domestic abuse is that what they call it? A surprising number of males have been abused.
>
> ***Selina:*** *So in what way is that relationship abusive?*
>
> **Nigel:** The violence.
>
> **Mike:** Although one was giving as good as the other, she seemed to be giving a bit more; but she could have given him even more because she could have got a weapon.

The male focus group made similar claims about the relationship being entrenched in physical fighting and this being a consequence of the violence in Buffy's role as the Slayer:

> **Craig:** The majority of her life is violence, so that's the one constant in her life, so she's probably going to be attracted to that.
>
> *And*
>
> **Liam:** She's always violent: that's why he was attracted to her.

The sentiment behind these quotes is summarized perfectly by Wilcox's claim: "It might be said that Buffy brings out the human side of Spike, while Spike brings out the monstrous side of Buffy" ("Set on This Earth" 104). A quote by male participant, Daniel, explicates this point: "It's just a kind of toxic environment for both of them."

The males were very critical of Spike, claiming that he deliberately tried to provoke Buffy into violence. A male group participant, Sean, claimed that Spike fulfilled traditional gender roles: "He played quite a dominating, strong male role." It was further suggested by Sean that Spike was unable to deal with Buffy's strength: "He wanted to show his strength over her, because he had come up against this strong woman and couldn't quite accept it." This parallels the thoughts of feminist scholar Audrey Mullender (63) that violence is utilized to subvert women. Likewise, the focus group of females felt Spike was quite intimidating: "There was almost the possibility that he could go out of control," said Jenny. Other female participants noted that, as a result, Buffy did not seem to trust Spike and felt a "bit tense" when he was around. Backing up the sentiments of the other two focus groups, the females also felt that the relationship possessed abusive elements:

> **Gemma:** Maybe a lot of the abusive relationships coming from females is emotional and verbal rather than violence; whereas this is so strongly both.
>
> ***Selina:** Do you think that's a realistic portrayal of abusive relationships then?*
>
> **Jenny:** I think there's a lot of psychological undercurrents as well. A lot of emotional abuse, maybe on both sides. They both know each other so well they know what buttons to press.
>
> **Karen:** They're also so emotionally entwined in it all. I think it is quite representative actually.

To that end, there was concern about the possible impact of this relationship overall on viewers, particularly younger ones: "They've glamorized everything that's wrong in a relationship and made it attractive, " said Jenny. It was also argued that Spike was "glamorizing" the "bad boy role" because he was quite "handsome" and "charismatic": "It's making it attractive, when it really isn't," stated Jenny. One female participant, Gemma, claimed that the producers had shown a bit naivety and ignorance about how this could be impressionable to younger viewers. The focus group of females was especially critical of the producers' strategy of ending Buffy and Spike's sexual relationship with an attempted rape scene:

> **Jenny:** There were other ways of solving that relationship. They could have just killed one of them off.
>
> **Gemma:** It seems really unusual doesn't it?
>
> **Karen:** It seems really odd.
>
> **Gemma:** They run the risk of people being like "Oh, right, is that how things end?"

These findings parallel the study of fans' reactions in discussion forums by Gwen Symonds ("'Bollocks': Spike Fans and Reception of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*"), where it was felt that this storyline was an "unwarranted plot device." For the female focus group participants, of particular note was the fact that Spike did not leave the show after the attempted rape scene: "I find it weird that a character that did an attempted rape was still kept on as a likable, relatable character," said Angela. A similar point was made by Sean in the focus group of males, that the attempted rape should, in his view, destroy any chances of a future relationship between the two characters. The aftermath of the attempted rape storyline was recently discussed in a paper by Wendy Fall, where it was maintained that sympathy is created for Spike through several plot mechanisms: keeping Buffy and Spike apart for the remainder of Season 6; restoring Spike's soul at the end of Season 6 and having him accomplish numerous good deeds in Season 7; and Buffy's never properly having discussed the attempted sexual assault with Spike or her friends throughout the remainder of Seasons 6 and 7.

Markedly, the violence enacted by Buffy to Spike was flagged as an issue of concern by the female, male, and older adult groups respectively:

> **Karen:** I think her violence in particular was quite startling. She really goes for it.
>
> *And*

> **Brian:** She has that tendency for violence and he brings it out [in her].
>
> *And*
>
> **Michaela:** The way it is portrayed it is suggesting that if a woman is empowered that gives her the right to go about thumping men. It's also like a call to women: this is how you can be if you're empowered.

It could be said that Buffy is inversing gender roles with her constant violence and aggression as an expression of dominance and power in the relationship (Mosher and Sirkin; Zaitchik and Mosher). As noted earlier, it was suggested by one of the participants in the male focus group that Spike's violence against Buffy is misogynistic in nature. Notably, one of the aims of third-wave feminism is to fight back against misogynistic violence (Pender 63). The way Buffy's violence is interpreted by focus group participants, however, is not as a positive "contestation" of male hegemony (Demetriou 342). This was particularly the case for the group of older adults: "Even the first scene where he was helping her, she immediately was into the attack. I dread to think that if society was like that and the influence on women, " said Olivia. A male participant in the group of older adults, Rob, tried to challenge this stance, arguing that such violence might be necessary if a woman was in an abusive relationship:

> **Rob:** Or is to do with young women giving as good as they get? Given that the better thing for them to do is to get out of such a relationship immediately, the violence is necessary.

The females in that focus group, however, counteracted this perspective, portraying Buffy as angry and out-of-control:

> **Michaela:** But she was starting the violence. He said something and she just started walloping him. She is just constantly aggressive.
>
> **Olivia:** She wasn't assertive; she was very aggressive and nasty.
>
> **Ruth:** And it's [her power] unregulated. No one is supervising her.

With her excessive violence, Buffy transgresses the "feminine ideal" and such deviant behavior fits into the "bad girl role" previously occupied by "dark" Slayer Faith (Jowett 70). It could be said that Buffy's behavior in Season 6 is the closest it has ever been to Faith's throughout the entire series of the show. Notably, the scene in "Dead Things" (6.13) during which Buffy hits Spike repeatedly has parallels with the scene in "Who Are You?" (4.16), in which Faith hits "herself" whilst Buffy is in her body (Wilcox, *Why* Buffy *Matters* 86). One of the participants, Gemma, in the female focus group picked up on Buffy's potential self-loathing in this scene: "She hates herself for liking him…I think she's just trying to hit herself by doing that, isn't she? Hitting that identity." This is similar to a point Dawn Heinecken makes that Buffy is "talking to herself" when she is beating up Spike: "[She] is actively grappling with the ramifications of her own sexuality, aggression and anger" (38).

The deviancy of the relationship was also a focus of discussion. It was felt that part of Buffy's attraction to Spike was rooted in the fact that it is deemed to be "wrong":

> **Liz:** I think that's why she likes submitting to him because she's always the one in control and doing what's right. I think she likes doing things with a vampire because she doesn't have to be in charge.

Moreover, Olivia, a participant in the group of older adults (mixed gender) felt that Buffy reveled in having sex with Spike in the balcony of *The Bronze* nightclub:

> **Olivia:** When she was on the balcony watching her friends dancing, it was clear she was enjoying herself with him regardless of what she was saying. It was obvious she preferred to be with him.

A similar debate unfolded between an older and younger participant in the male focus group disagreeing about Buffy's active participation in violent sexual practices with Spike:

> **Sean:** It's just another form of human sexual behavior. Their attraction sort of generated that S&M behavior.
>
> **Brian:** I would say that S&M is more of a consent thing though where two people are mutually included. I think she's not sure about what she's doing and why she's doing it.
>
> **Sean:** I think she's very much into it. I think that's why she resisted it [in order] to generate his need for violence. I think without his need for violence, she'd be pretty lost.

In these readings, Buffy is deriving pleasure from her sexual experiences with Spike; albeit feeling guilty and unsure about it (see Waggoner). This is, hence, a representation of a relationship that is flawed in terms of third-wave feminism, which emphasizes the right to judgment-free sexual pleasure as a key component of gender equality (Baumgardner and Richards; Henry). Through her use of Spike, she is also fitting the "bad girl" role of using men for the purpose of sexual fulfillment (Jowett 86).

Buffy: Vulnerable or Manipulator?

The positioning of Buffy as a "vulnerable" and "broken" character was a common theme within the focus groups of males and females. At first, the group of female participants felt that Buffy was quite a dominant character after watching the first clip:

> **Jenny:** She's quite forthright isn't she?
>
> **Gemma:** She's trying to exert that independent woman, "I don't need your help" type. He's trying to be a nice guy, inverted commas [air quotes], by trying to kill that vampire for her, but she actually sees that as a challenge.
>
> **Maria:** She definitely doesn't need him; she's quite happy without him.
>
> **Liz:** She seemed very put off by his help.

The terms "forthright" and "independent" denote her as transgressing gender roles; further strengthened by the fact that she does not need a man to save her and seems to view this as a challenge to her role. The character of Buffy is, hence, transgressing the prescribed behaviors of the traditional male-female binary (see Butler) that women should be docile and dependent. Conversely, she is adhering more to the progressive doctrine of "power feminism," denoting independence and strength (Wolf).

After watching the second and third parts of the storyline, the females were incredulous at the change in Buffy when she came back from the dead:

> **Angela:** I can't get over her lack of power. In the first bit, she's so much stronger and so determined. And then when she came back and she was standing so quiet.
>
> **Gemma:** Like a kicked animal or something.
>
> **Angela:** Apart from her physical strength, she has no power or strength at all. She's completely weakened.

One of the female participants, Jenny, claimed this was particularly evident when Spike had sex with Buffy on the balcony of *The Bronze:* "He just abused her there in front of everybody. You could see she had some sort of mental argument going on in her head, but she just let him" (contrast Olivia's "it was clear she was enjoying herself"). Moreover, female participants also felt that Spike was trying to entice Buffy to a darker side of life:

> **Gemma:** He's almost trying to show her the ropes as well. Like 'come on, hit me, that's what we do,' trying to entice that out of her.
> **Jenny:** But isn't that him just trying to persuade her or make her leave her old life behind?
> **Karen:** Like grooming her.

Paralleling the group of females, the male focus group participants also felt there was a noticeable difference in Buffy's strength between the first and later parts of the storyline:

> **Brian:** She seems to flip between being a strong female and being vulnerable.
>
> ***Selina:** In what scenes do you think she's vulnerable?*

> **Brian:** When she came back from the dead and then after the rape scene. The times she was strong was killing vampires and fighting against Spike.
>
> **Andy:** I'll go with that I think. Certain circumstances she's weak; certain ones, she's strong. She flips between according to circumstances.

To that end, some of the male participants felt that Spike was insidious by deliberately pursuing Buffy when she was vulnerable:

> **Brian:** I think he's trying to take advantage of her, as she is not sure what she wants. It's as if he's there and dragging her along.
>
> *And*
>
> **Daniel:** It was when she came back [from the dead] that something changed and then I feel like he almost took advantage of it to get into the relationship.

In these interpretations, she is more like a "victim feminist," predicated on an identity of powerlessness and innocence (Wolf). The male participants made similar points about Spike trying to control Buffy with his behavior:

> **Brian:** I felt he was quite possessive when he was trying to manipulate her: "Oh, come over to my side in the shadows."
>
> ***Selina:*** *So, is that a form of emotional abuse, do you think?*
>
> **Brian:** Yeah, I would say it is. Trying to control someone and manipulate them.
>
> **Craig:** Sometimes it seems that he was manipulating her into liking him; but whether he realized he was doing it or not.
>
> **Sean:** I feel there was this psychological struggle the entire way through. He was just consistent in his attempts to dominate her.

To that end, Spike is adhering to the "masculine" actions commonly prescribed in Western societies: leadership, standing up for one's beliefs, anger and aggression, competitive and controlling behavior (Clare 35-36; Larkin 338). Within this storyline, participants perceive Buffy to conform to the "good girl," an identity shaped by hegemony, by allowing herself to be dominated by male authority in the form of Spike (Jowett 44-45). The way the characters of Buffy and Spike in this relationship are perceived by focus group participants evokes Julia T. Wood's theory about women being defined by their bodies and how men treat them being one of the themes evident in mediated representations of gender. In this scenario, women are passive and powerless, whilst men are aggressive and dominant.

Aside from physical violence, it was also felt by participants in all of the groups that Buffy was manipulating Spike. The female focus group participants, firstly, felt that Buffy was contradictory in her behavior with Spike precisely because she was conflicted in her feelings for him:

> **Liz:** She didn't seem to know what she wanted either. She broke up with him and then she was complaining when he wasn't moving on; and when he did move on, she wouldn't talk to him. It's like "Well, you did tell him to move on."
>
> ***Selina:*** *Are you talking about him sleeping with Anya?*
>
> **Liz:** Yeah, when he slept with Anya. Buffy just seemed to want him to be obsessed with her and only her at that point. It was more jealousy.
>
> **Gemma:** In that scene when she was calling it off originally, it was kind of like she was trying to convince herself that's what she wanted. I think secretly there was still a part of her that craved him.
>
> **Liz:** She does admit that she has feelings for him as well. I don't think it really helps her case at all. It just makes him want her more and makes him believe she's going to come back to him.

A participant in the male focus group, Daniel, echoed these sentiments: "I think it's like she's conflicted. Confused about how she feels about him or how she feels in general." These sentiments were echoed by another of the participants in the male focus group:

> ***Selina:*** *What are your thoughts on Buffy now you've seen the full storyline?*
>
> **Andy:** Manipulator. Just something about her in that last clip. I'm not quite sure. Dragged him along for a while and then get

> one over on him. Something had changed there. She's trying to hurt the guy now.

Taking this even further, one of the females in the older adults group, Olivia, described Buffy in the following way: "I just thought she was so manipulative. She wanted to keep him exactly where she wanted him." To that end, it was even questioned by Olivia whether the struggle in the attempted rape scene could have been part of Buffy's manipulation of Spike: "Why did she let it go so far before she kicked him? Is it another part of her little game?" These thoughts about Buffy fall under the rubric of "adversarial sexual beliefs," where this sexual relationship is seen to be exploitative, with those involved manipulative and untrustworthy (Burt 218).

Perhaps the most surprising finding in the entire research study was the intensely critical reaction to Buffy, particularly within the group of older adults. It was felt by the older adults and one of the older participants in the male focus group that they did not have sympathy for Buffy to begin with, because her role as Slayer means she has to kill creatures. A comment by older adult participant, Nigel, demonstrates this mind-set quite effectively:

> **Nigel:** Most of us would feel bad at having to kill an animal for food or putting down our favorite pet. She doesn't seem to be bothered by that at all. She doesn't seem to have a conscience for her actions.

In this reading, Buffy fits the idea of the "monstrous-feminine," where she is perceived as monstrous *precisely* because she kills monsters (Creed). From viewing only this storyline, Buffy's character is described in very negative terms by participants in the group of older adults:

> **Olivia:** And her interaction with the other women wasn't so warm and cuddly, I'll save you attitude; it was very standoffish wasn't it.
>
> **Nigel:** She's quite a hard person.
>
> **Olivia:** Yeah, I just thought she was completely disingenuous.
>
> **Michaela:** The thing with the sister just didn't fit with what she was. Her and the sister suddenly had a heart-to-heart?

This parallels Wilcox's ("Set on This Earth" 98) argument that Buffy struggled to feel emotions when she returned from the dead. Moreover, the reaction of participants entrench the arguments made by gender theorists (e.g. Clare; Larkin) that females exhibiting "masculine characteristics" such as a lack of emotion are likely to be criticized. Considering the fact that Spike was deemed to be likable by female pensioners and some in the group of females precisely because of his emotions—compared to Buffy who is disliked for her lack thereof—gives credence to E. Ann Kaplan's view that "women have been permitted in representation to assume the position defined as masculine as long as the man steps into her position" (12a).

Having said that, a number of participants in the focus group of older adults thought Buffy was redeemed to some extent by her reaction to thinking she had killed a human:

> **Rob:** She still has a moral code because she's concerned about the person she's killed.
>
> **Kathy:** That's what she had a conscience about. She'd killed one and he'd said to her "Well, you've saved thousands" but it wasn't washing with her.
>
> **Mike:** Yeah, there was some conscience and remorse. She's not a true psycho[path].

There was a similar sentiment in the focus group of female participants:

> **Angela:** She still seems like a good person with a moral compass. When she thinks she's killed someone, she's not comfortable and wants to hand herself in.
>
> **Karen:** Kind of inner turmoil.
>
> **Liz:** And she's likable—I feel that she didn't make her point throughout that she wasn't interested in him to begin with and then you kind of feel sorry for her, because she's so broken.

It has been suggested by Naffin (380) that criminality in females could instead be construed as a failed attempt at social conditioning in conventional femininity. The fact that Buffy had a conscience—said by participants to be a "feminine quality"—was precisely what Faith lacked (openly, anyway) when she accidently killed a human. This remorse and the fact that the criminality was accidental are the features that make Buffy redeemable to some of the focus group participants. These results are also in direct contrast to the findings of the previous audience research paper, where Buffy was deemed to be the preferable character by most participants for her ability to show her emotions and try to do the right thing (Doran). Such a finding is indicative of the change in Buffy's character between Seasons 3 and 6.

Spike's feelings for Buffy: In Love or Obsessed?

Notably, there was a marked difference between the participants in the male focus group in terms of how they felt about Spike overall. The younger males in the group all felt that Spike was the more abusive character because he refused to accept that the relationship had ended:

> **Daniel:** And she's now realized although she does want him, she knows that it's not right. I feel that full last part was her trying to get away and him not letting her get away.
>
> *And*
>
> **Craig:** At the same time, she used him and admittedly did so. And then she did the right thing and stopped it and tried to distance herself and he struggled to let go.

A participant in the male focus group also made an interesting comparison between Buffy and Spike's relationship and stalking:

> **Daniel:** I feel almost like he was that obsessed with her that she became like an object and that he was trying to destroy that object by the end of it. I read something once about people who stalk and they become that obsessed that they treat the person like an object. They stop seeing them as humans and in the end they will kill them, because if they can't have their object no one will have it. I feel that at the end it got to that [type of] possession.

Stalking is a personalized form of violence, in which the relationship between perpetrator and victim is paramount (Kropp et al. 601). In the case of Spike and Buffy, this would fall into the typology of "exintimate partner," where an individual struggles to deal with the end of their relationship. Ex-intimates were found to be the most aggressive, intrusive, and likely to threaten and assault in their behaviors (Sheridan and Davies). These victims are the most likely to be threatened and assaulted (Kropp et al. 607; McEwan et al. 442). Notably, stalking and intimate partner violence offences tend to intertwine: for instance, in 2015, 66.2% of female stalking victims reported stalking by a current or former intimate partner (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence). Whether Spike could be seen as "stalking" Buffy is something that would probably need to be asked in audience research with fans of the *BtVS*, who were aware of his behaviors towards her over the years.

There was also some debate within the male focus group whether Spike was entirely manipulating Buffy or whether he actually did care about her:

> **Liam:** It wasn't all violence. He genuinely had feelings for her.
>
> Andy: Assuming they're real now and not put on?
>
> **Liam:** He kept those human traits! When she was killed, he was crouched down thinking of her.
>
> **Craig:** It's almost as if he's trying to emulate those emotions. He doesn't fully understand them. He's just trying to make it look like he has them to be accepted by people.
>
> **Liam:** Maybe he's using what he once was.

The male focus group participant, Liam, who defended Spike's feelings for Buffy, was the lone fan of the show in the group, as well as the only one who felt Spike was likable: "I feel sorry for Spike. I see traits in him that are human. He's not one hundred percent evil." This backs up Sherryl Vint's argument that fans of *BtVS* hold their own interpretations of the characters.

Interestingly, in the group of older adults, reactions differed between males and females, with the latter being more sympathetic towards Spike. The male pensioners felt that Spike did not really love Buffy, particularly given the attempted rape: "In the end, it wasn't love he had for her; it was obsession," said Nigel. One of the participants in the group of older adults, Michaela, by contrast, noted that he did seem to react with genuine emotion at times: "In the quieter moments when he's not talking to anybody else, you can see that he has feelings for her." She also noted that the ability was particularly impressive given his lack of a soul: "He is trying to identify with her. I feel that if he has no soul and can still do that, what would he be like with a soul? He would be some super-human person."

Correspondingly, Liz, the singular fan of the show in the group of female participants said Spike had changed because of his love for Buffy: "I feel that the fact that he kills other vampires now is quite admirable. He doesn't behave the way he used to." Another previous viewer of the show, Gemma, also defended Spike's actions to some extent: "I still think his intentions are good though. Good as in he just cares so much about this woman that he'll do anything. He's just trying to convince her to give him a chance and see he's not a terrible person." Interestingly, these participants are empathizing with Spike precisely because he does *not* adhere to the prescribed "masculine" behavior of hiding emotion (Clare; Larkin).

Based on the reactions from focus group participants, the attempted rape scene is the one where Spike adheres to the "hyper-masculine" model, utilizing extreme violence and aggression as a means to re-establish his male dominance and power (Mosher and Sirkin; Mosher and Tomkins; Zaitchik and Mosher). By definition, rape is an aggressive act used to dominate another (Wood). In this scene, according to the group of males, sexual violence was realistically portrayed:

> **Daniel:** That was the scene that broke through the fantasy of that into the real world.
>
> **Craig:** Yeah, their abilities didn't matter. That scene was just kind of pure. There was no sort of alternative factors in it like how strong they are. All there was was him trying to do that to her.
>
> **Sean:** That's the only place where you could come in with some kind of realistic assessment of criminal action.

Notably, Wilcox has previously noted that this scene was deliberately portrayed with no music, bright lighting and Spike's face in a non-vampire form in order to emphasis the fact that "this monstrosity is a human act" (*Why*, 35; "Set," 105). Moreover, Fall makes the point that Spike's keeping his human face throughout this scene emphasizes that "his sexual lust is not bloodlust," i.e. it is not related to his vampirism (76).

Given Buffy and Spike's previous relationship, the sexual assault falls into the category of "acquaintance rape" where the victim knows her attacker. This complicates the situation because if she fails to resist him immediately, this could encourage blame to be attributed to her (Kopper 91). These perceptions could be somewhat responsible for the disagreement to some degree in the focus group of male participants about the rape scene:

> **Craig:** His actions at the end were wrong.
>
> **Sean:** It really summed him up. I thought that's how that scene might develop as soon as he walked in and shut the door.
>
> **Andy:** I'm not making excuses for it, but it looked like the act of what looked like a desperate man. He'd tried everything else…the final savage act is all he has left really.
>
> ***Selina:*** *Do you think he intended to go there to do that or do you think he lost control?*
>
> **Andy:** Lost control. He was just so desperate that he would have done anything.
>
> **Liam:** He just lost control, didn't he?

The suggestion that Spike "lost control" is interesting to contrast with the requirements of David Finkelhor's model of factors[5] needed for sexual violence to occur: motivation to offend, overcoming internal inhibitions, overcoming external barriers, and victim resistance. The final two factors were present in his having access to Buffy and his trying to overpower her resistance. In terms of his internal inhibitions and motivations, the element of "losing control" suggests that this was more of an impromptu act predicated on a motivation of trying to "persuade" Buffy of her feelings for him.

When it comes to the attempted rape scene, an interesting point made by one of the participants in the group of females, Maria, suggested that it could have ended with Buffy giving in to Spike, as she had done so many times before. This mirrors Heinecken's study of fans' reactions to the relationship, which found that "Buffy repeatedly denies her desire for Spike, but is repeatedly shown giving in" (3). A discussion thereafter followed in this focus group regarding the reasons why she pushed him away. Some theorized that Spike has perhaps received the "signals" that he could push her a bit further:

> **Maria:** He must have been getting the signals that he could go that far-
>
> **Angela:** I don't know why she didn't push him away sooner. She was so submissive towards him.

Moreover, it was suggested by Angela in the group of females that Buffy perhaps only pushed Spike away because she was upset and angry at him for sleeping with Anya, rather than not wanting to be with him.

By contrast, other participants in the group of females felt that Spike was menacing in his intentions, noting that Buffy clearly said no and he physically overpowered her:

> **Jenny:** Whatever she's done, he should not have done that. She said no and she kept saying it. Whatever she'd done to lead him on, nothing can excuse it, nothing.
>
> **Liz:** She was physically hurt as well so the fact that she wasn't fighting back as much. She had already said that she was in pain.
>
> **Jenny:** But he literally overpowered her, didn't he. And he didn't stop when she said no.

These participants in both groups clearly feel that due to Buffy's clear refusal of Spike's sexual advances Buffy adheres to "rape victim" status, denoting sympathy and respect (Felson). Throughout the series, Buffy is very rarely seen to be physically vulnerable: the scene in the bathroom was one of the times when her body could be seen to be "fragile" and "vulnerable," opening her up to the "structural vulnerability" of the female body to rape (Brownmiller 13-14). Notably, Symonds ("'Bollocks': Spike Fans") found that fans of the show were critical of this storyline, feeling that the attempted rape scene reduced the "feminist hero" of Buffy to a "victim."

One of the common "rape myths" is that resisting a sexual assault must involve fighting back (Peterson and Muehlenhard 140). The submissive nature of Buffy during the attempted rape was something that was raised by both the groups of older adults and male participants respectively:

> **Olivia:** Why didn't she stop him earlier in that? Why did she go into girlie mode? "No, no, no, please don't do this."
>
> *And*
>
> **Andy:** Can we read anything into the fact that Buffy didn't fight back like she did earlier?

It is understandable to see why viewers might draw that conclusion, given Buffy's earlier violence against Spike and her physical prowess in general. As Debra Jackson noted, "Buffy's comportment is open, uninhibited and confident, echoing the comportment of the conventionally masculine body" (16). A participant in the older adults group, Mike, also felt that Buffy was making excuses for Spike in the final scene, where she pleads for Xander not to pursue Spike and refuses to tell Willow and Tara what has transpired: "I felt sad that they were showing it like that with the woman making excuses at the end for that attempted rape." This mirrors a point made by Fall about the prolonged "silence" of Buffy following this scene, where she says "Nothing" when Willow asks what happened and thereafter never discusses her trauma with her friends.

As mentioned earlier, Beverly A. Kopper's (91) study on acquaintance rape found it more likely that blame may be attributed to the victim when she knows her attacker and does not immediately resist him. This blaming can be seen in the case of Buffy and Spike, especially given the fact that they had a conversation in the bathroom beforehand:

> **Maria:** At the beginning in the bathroom. They were talking. It wasn't just rush in and-
>
> **Gemma:** Slam her against the wall or something.
>
> **Maria:** Yeah. They were talking. It wasn't that she turned round and he was there.

This mirrored a point made in the group of older adults about why he was allowed into the bathroom in the first place: "Why didn't she kick him out the room? That's not an excuse for anything he did, but what was she doing letting him in?" asked Kathy. In Irina Anderson and Kathy Doherty's study looking at conversational data, they noted that rape victims are routinely accused of reckless behavior. This reading of Buffy and Spike by a number of participants is an indirect reading of such "recklessnes," where Buffy is a "risk-taker" by allowing Spike into the bathroom and having a conversation with him before the attack took place.

Discussion

To conclude, the focus group reactions in this study back up the argument previously made by Symonds ("Solving Problems with Sharp Objects") that gender roles are not simply inverted on *BtVS*. It could be said that the traditional male-female binary model is reshaped, challenged and reinforced by the findings from this study. Spike adheres to "hyper-masculinity," yet displays "feminine" qualities of emotion. This gives credence to Judith Butler's argument that gender should be perceived as fluid and variable based on situations. Some of the participants in the male and female focus groups felt that in pursuing a relationship with Buffy, Spike took advantage of her when she was vulnerable and was controlling in their relationship. Further, most of the participants in the male focus group believed that Spike did not really care about Buffy. Viewers perceived Spike as possessing aggression, the need for dominance, and controlling behavior, which adheres to the hyper-masculinity model (see Mosher and Sirkin; Mosher and Tomkins; Zaitchik and Mosher).

The attempted rape of Buffy by Spike was "read" in several different ways by each of the viewers. Some in the male focus group felt that the attempted rape scene was Spike trying to stop Buffy "escaping" the relationship, with one comparing it to how stalkers view their victims as objects. The females were a bit more divided on Spike and the attempted rape. Some felt that he perhaps "lost control" and received the signals that he could go that far from Buffy, with one suggesting that Buffy perhaps only pushed him away because she was upset at him for sleeping with Anya. By contrast, others in the female focus group felt that Spike was wrong, since Buffy clearly stated no and he refused to stop.

The emotional side of Spike resulted in sympathy from the females in the older adult group, the focus group of females and a couple of the older participants in the male focus group. In particular, Spike's reaction to Buffy's death and resurrection, as well as the fact that he possessed these human emotions without having a soul, were cited as reasons for having sympathy for him. It is interesting that emotion is what makes Spike still sympathetic and likable, since that was the reason why the character of Buffy was deemed to be more likable than Faith in my previous audience research study (Doran).

The reaction to Buffy was far more critical overall and similar to people's feelings about Faith in my earlier audience research study (Doran). The group of females were initially admiring of Buffy for being "forthright" and "independent," similar to the findings of my earlier study (Doran). This then changed to criticism of her for acting helpless and submissive in the relationship with Spike, as well as being too violent and aggressive with him. Interestingly, in these readings, Buffy is adhering to both the "good girl" and "bad girl" models (Jowett) by following male authority, on the one hand, and behaving in a sexualized and violent manner respectively, on the other. The fact that she is shifting between models and her portrayal of each of them is so extreme is probably the reason why her behavior was not viewed positively.

The group of older adults felt that Buffy was rather "hard" (i.e. stoic) and "standoffish," because of her role as Slayer. The females in the older adult group were very critical about her violent and emotional abuse of Spike, with her criminality transgressing feminine conventions (Naffin). By contrast, the male focus group participants were generally not very critical of her, although one older male participant felt that she was rather manipulative in the final part of the storyline and trying to emotionally hurt Spike. The female focus group and some of the older adults did still feel she had a moral code, however, because of her reaction to her belief that she had killed a human. Notably, this reaction is perhaps the dividing line that separates the character of Buffy in this storyline and Faith in Season 3 of *BtVS*, whereby Buffy's reaction to immediately go to the police and admit responsibility was the complete opposite of Faith's denial and attempt to run away from what she had done.

More surprisingly, it was suggested by one participant in the group of older adults that Buffy's actions in the attempted rape scene were part of her manipulation, given she did not fight back as she usually did. A similar question was asked by a participant in the male focus group, who felt Buffy was a manipulative character. Literature around rape scripts indicate that because Buffy was deemed to be a "bad girl" (Glick and Fiske), did not immediately fight back (Brownmiller) and it was a form of acquaintance rape (Kopper), there is less sympathy and exoneration from blame than perhaps there would usually be for a victim of attempted rape.

The thoughts on the television show itself were indicative of a divide between different ages and genders. The female participants were the most praising of the show, describing it as "appealing" and "edgy." Despite this, females were concerned about the impact of *BtVS*, particularly to perhaps impressionable viewers in making an abusive relationship seem appealing. The male participants—bar the fan and other previous viewer of the show—claimed it was unrealistic and not to their taste. The older adults also strongly felt that this was not the kind of thing they would usually watch. Interestingly, all groups described the show as "American," relating this to the glamorization of violence. Since the participants are British, this shows the impact of cultural differences upon viewers' reactions to *BtVS*.

Focus groups were deemed to be the most appropriate method to capture audience reactions to BtVS, providing an opportunity to show clips from the show and then have a group discussion about certain issues. The findings of this study are limited to the extent that most of the participants had never previously seen the show and so their perceptions were entirely dependent on the clips shown to them. By contrast, a previous viewer of the show would have been familiar with the characters and their relationship throughout the seasons.

Future research could use focus groups to compare and contrast reactions of *BtVS* viewers to non-viewers to distinguish whether this affects how they "read" storylines. For instance, a fan of the show would have witnessed Spike and Buffy's relationship from Season 2 onwards and may have different thoughts about the storyline and the characters involved. This was evident in a study by Symonds ("'Bollocks': Spike Fans") of discussion forums relating to *BtVS*, which found that fans felt the attempted rape scene was an insult to fans who were emotionally invested in his character. Moreover, it would also be interesting to carry out further research on audience reactions to Buffy's "darker" character in Season Six and contrasting this against the character of Faith in Season 3.

Notes

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[1] The paper published by Doran, "The 'Faith Goes Dark' Storyline and Viewers," explored television audiences' reactions to the storyline about Faith's transformation in Season 3 of *BtVS* (1997-2003). The main purpose of Doran's study was to examine gender roles in relation to the characters of Faith and Buffy. Since 2012, the author has changed her name from Selina Doran to Selina E. M. Kerr. On Faith as "bad girl," see also Helford.

[2] This paper was originally presented at the *Euro-Slayage* conference in summer 2016 and, based on discussions there, additions have since been made. The author would like to thank everyone who offered insightful comments and questions. The main additions to the paper are justifications for why the study ends on the attempted rape scene and further detail about expectations about focus group reactions.

[3] *Buffy Goes Dark*, edited by Lynne E. Edwards, Elizabeth L. Rambo, and James B. South, focuses solely on Seasons 6 and 7.

[4] Both Scotland and England are nations within Great Britain, so all participants fall under the rubric of British nationality whether or not they self-identify as British, Scottish, or English.

[5] Although this is in relation to child sexual abuse, its components are transferable to other types of sexual violence.

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Appendix: Focus Group Discussion Topics

Show participants first part of relationship [Buffy finds out about Spike's feelings and rejects him]

After watching that first part, what are your thoughts on Buffy? Do you consider her to be a strong character? How does this relate to gender roles?

What are your feelings about Spike? Is he a strong character? How does this relate to gender roles?

What are your thoughts on the relationship between the two characters?

Show participants second part of relationship [Relationship between Spike and Buffy]

After viewing the second part of the storyline, how do you feel about Buffy? Does her sexuality and violence make her "deviant"? Is she less likable than the first part of the storyline because of her behavior?

Why did you think she behaves in the way she does? Does she have too much power because of her physical strength?

What do you think of the character of Spike?

Does his sexuality and violence make him "deviant"? Do you find Spike to be a likable character?

Why do you think Spike behaves the way he does throughout the relationship?

What are your thoughts on the relationship between the two characters? In what ways is it abusive? Which character do you think is at fault in the relationship?

Show participants the third part of relationship [Relationship ends and sexual attack of Buffy by Spike]

What do you now think of the character of Buffy?

What does this entire storyline tell you about gender roles: is she a strong female character or is she weak? Is this a realistic portrayal of women in modern day society?

What does Spike's character tell you about gender roles? Does Spike's emotional side make him more appealing? How does this compare to his masculine strength and sexuality? Do you think he has too much power because of his physical strength?

How do you feel about Spike's actions towards the end of the clip?

Does Buffy in any way cause the attack by Spike? Do you have sympathy for either of the characters and, if so, why?

Is this a realistic portrayal of abusive relationships? If not, how do you think people would usually behave?

Are these characters criminals? Do you think they should be punished for their actions?

Concluding Thoughts on the Show

Who has watched this show before? What are your thoughts on it? Is this something you would usually watch?

What kind of messages is it conveying in relation to gender roles, criminality and deviance? What about the social issues of domestic violence and sexual assault?