

SR Quest

the bimonthly newsletter of Simply Research Services LLC, a research and analytics consulting firm

Welcome

Welcome to the inaugural edition of SR Quest, the bimonthly newsletter of Simply Research Services (SRS). My name is Reba Chaisson and I am the principal here at SRS. Let's talk a bit about research and what you can expect to see in each edition.

The gift of research is that it helps inform our decisions and strategies on a range of issues. But there is always more to learn, deeper dives and strategic adjustments to be made in response to social and economic changes -anticipated or not. Given this, research needs to be integral to what we do so we are always and simultaneously learning, inquiring and prepared. We must continuously peel back the layers of a matter to uncover that next insight as we strive to stay ahead of the competition. As such, we endeavor to make each issue of SR Quest chock full of articles and tidbits that keep you talking in the conference room, at the water cooler and even at the dinner table long after you have read them - because research is a quest, an ongoing process of discovery.

The topics in SR Quest will cover an array of subjects in the for-profit and non-profit sectors, ranging from customer insights to the social climate of college campuses, film aesthetics and audience tastes, and occasionally matters of family and community. Our articles aim to keep you talking, thinking, discussing, and wondering



about issues that permeate and shape our lives, livelihood, and the actual work we do.

In this edition, we expound on the benefits and shortcomings of research with an article called 'Research is...' and then present an example with a mini-study on the popular HBO series, Game of Thrones. We hope you enjoy them both. We also want you to provide us with feedback and suggestions to strengthen future newsletters, so please drop us a note at:

info@simplyresearchsvcs.com.

Learn more about the work of Simply Research Services at www.simplyresearchsvcs.com.

Happy reading!

*Reba Chaisson, PhD
Principal*

Oxford defines research as “the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions.”

Research is...

I think it is reasonable to assume that most people know what research is, but its value to a range of businesses is not always clear. It's simple really. Whether the business is a B to B or B to C or even a non-profit, it has customers – people and entities to whom they are selling their products and services. These can be students, theater patrons, hotel guests, retail consumers, or hospitals, health clubs, a craft brewpub, and other establishments. How can research help a business sell more of its products and services? Well, try thinking of this with respect to what it means to have a best friend.

When thinking of a gift for our best friend, the task is easy. We know them as a result of spending so much time talking with and listening to them and observing their behaviors and tendencies. With these insights, we can anticipate their wants, needs and what will make them happy or disappointed. A business should get to know its customer like a best friend. It should want to establish and maintain a rapport with him or her so in turn, the customer relies on the business and maintains a strong connection to it. In the context of schooling, this is referred to as students having a sense of belonging. Hotels can view this as akin to guests feeling at home. For theater-goers, it is feeling welcomed and comfortable. For retail customers, it is being appreciated and valued.

A business can begin to develop this relationship with its customer by first ascertaining how they prefer to interact with the business - by phone, email, text, or some other mode of communication. Once this is understood, the company can effectively talk to the individual and hear

what they have to say. Second, the company can analyze data to uncover spending patterns and learn the customer's preferences, tastes, and tendencies (i.e. performances attended, movie genres they seem to have an affinity for, where they prefer to sit, what type of adult education courses they seem to enjoy). These findings can be buttressed with primary research to gain deep insights into the individual's thoughts on the brand's products or services.

Primary research employs methods like “shop-alongs,” surveys and focus groups, just to name a few. By observing the customer's shopping behavior, shop-along researchers can document how the individual makes purchase decisions. They can note what products or services are being compared to those of the brand (i.e. colleges or other hotels considered). What is the shopper's level of sensitivity to price based on their observed reactions and in some cases, measurements of their physiological responses? Researchers can also note how difficult or easy it is for a customer to find the company's offerings on the shelf, on the web, or in proximity to their residence.

Focus groups can provide similar insights but through engagement with small groups of people, rather than through strict observation. These learnings are rich because they are often generated from lively discussions that speak to the

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Game of Thrones and the Enduringness of Story

About 20 years ago, I sat down separately with several film and television development executives in Los Angeles to talk about their aesthetic priorities and what influenced their decisions to greenlight a project. I wrote the findings of the interviews in my book, *For Entertainment Purposes Only* (Lexington Books, 2000). Each person gave me permission to disclose his and her company's names because it was essential to lend credence to the views of such influential leaders on the topic. Among the people I spoke with for the research were development executives from HBO and October Films. Their business priorities were consistent with respect to the profitability of the project, measured by premium channel subscribers and modest ticket sales, respectively. They also noted the generating of buzz as important - Hollywood's term for 'talk' and media attention about a project. All spoke eloquently about their aesthetic priorities which were to remain true to the values of what was then considered independent film.

Also described as artsy works with budgets under \$20 million, independent film carries the tacit mandate of telling intimate stories with deep characters portrayed with strong acting. These projects typically differ from major (or mainstream) studio productions in several respects. Mainstream studios typically incur high production costs, emphasize splash over story substance, use high-profile actors to carry the film, and are motivated to maximize ticket

sales at the box office or rake in advertising revenue on television. In short, the focus of major studios is on the commercialization of the films they produce and distribute, measuring a project's success in dollars more so than accolades. Of course, there are exceptions in that many mainstream films are simply great, with strong stories and acting such as Paramount and Twentieth Century Fox's *Titanic* and New Line Cinema's *Lord of the Rings*, both high-grossing and award-winning films. But exceptions notwithstanding, mainstream film contrasts sharply with independent film, whose goal is to stay true to the art form by consistently telling compelling stories with high-quality cinematic presentations.

Examples of 'indie' films in the 90s were Miramax's *Smoke Signals*, October Films' *The Apostle* and Fox Searchlight's *Boys Don't Cry*, all of which won multiple independent film awards and the last even won an Oscar for best acting. Recently, films such as Annapurna Pictures' *If Beale Street Could Talk* garnered Oscar and Golden Globe wins for acting in 2019 and A24's *Moonlight* won Oscar for best film in 2017. All of these films fit the mold of 'indie' as defined years ago, but there is a spirited debate occurring in the industry today. The debate concerns what constitutes independent film and whether budget should factor into a film's classification as indie or mainstream. We agree that budget should not be a factor, and instead the emphasis remain on the story and the quality of its presentation. We will save these arguments for another day. But it is worth mentioning that none of the arguments consider where the original programming of premium and



Chart 1

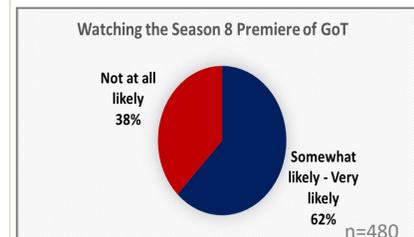
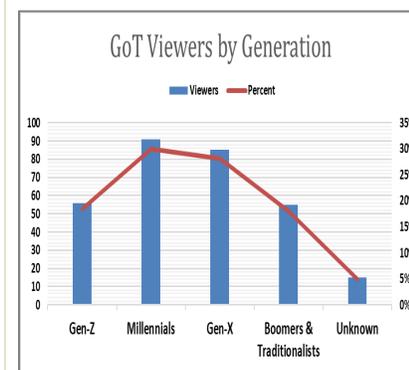


Chart 2



Game of Thrones... (continued)

streaming channels, fits, whether in the form of movies or television series.

Years ago, HBO's original programming was considered independent because it adhered to the indie mandate and the work was done outside of the major studios and their measures for success. Today, like HBO, companies such as Netflix and AMC not only develop award winning movies but also television series. Their success is measured in the indie tradition of awards and of course, channel subscribers rather than commercial advertising dollars. Because of this differentiation, we consider original programming to be of the indie mold.

So, in addition to assessing just how well independent studios have remained true to the sector's values, we wondered if the aesthetic priorities of the industry 20 years ago reflect the aesthetic tastes of the audiences they seek to attract today. If audience preferences aligned with studio priorities, it would suggest that it is the appeal of a story that endures, and audiences simply thirst for a good cinematic presentation of it. Given this, the story's underlying elements could offer insights into what can potentially predict the success of a film or television project.

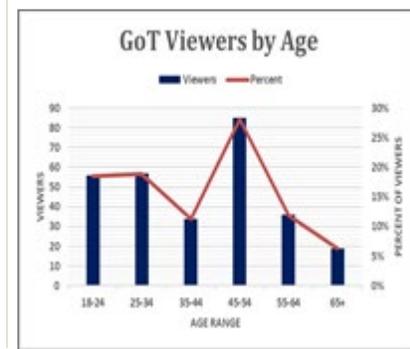
Twenty years ago, DVRs had not yet arrived; VCRs were the recording devices of the day. Cable TV was limited with just a handful of premium movie channels like HBO and TMC. The world wide web was on the cusp of exploding into homes and moving into mainstream

prominence. Mobile phones were quite literally just a phone, not the handheld microcomputers that we use today to manage our everyday lives and stay in constant touch with friends and family through texts, emojis, social media posts, and instant photos. So, with the technological revolution we have experienced since the turn of the century, have audiences' cinematic preferences for independent works changed too? We went about exploring this question with a mini-survey on the HBO series, Game of Thrones (GoT).

Described in part as a fantasy drama, Game of Thrones is a television series set in medieval times about a battle over 7 kingdoms. The past seven seasons has depicted battles among the various factions leading up to the final showdown anticipated in the upcoming and final season, which premieres on April 14th. In addition to war, the show integrates elements of politics, gender, race, class, and age. GoT's U.S. viewership has quadrupled over its seven seasons, growing from about 2.5 to more than 10 million on average per episode. By comparison, The Sopranos series finale drew [11.9 million](#) and The West Wing pulled approximately 8 million viewers on average. The show has also generated a lot of buzz over the years making it arguably the most talked about series, with cultural critics, pundits, psychologists, and marketers weighing in on its value and offering explanations for its appeal. With these achievements, it can be argued that GoT is an outlier because of its wild

Fifty-three percent of Game of Thrones viewers are female

Chart 3



Game of Thrones... (continued)

popularity. We would counter that it is because of its reach that the show warrants a teasing out of the elements that appeal to so many people. In short, GoT seems to exemplify viewers' aesthetic tastes, making it a very appropriate choice for the study.

Viewer Demographics

The web-based survey was administered over two days, March 27th and 28th, 2019. It consisted of 11 questions posed to 540 individuals across the country and of all age groups, asking about their level of interest in the season 8 premiere of GoT. With a response rate of 89%, the survey contained 482 responses and a completion rate of 86%. The sample yielded a margin of error of +/-4.6% at a 95% confidence level. Per Chart 1 in the sidebar, 62% of respondents indicated they were somewhat to very likely to watch the season 8 premiere. Of these, 53% were female. The age band consisting of 45-54 year-olds made up the largest segment at 28% (see Chart 3). Eighteen to 24 and 25 to 34 year-olds comprised 19% each. The respondents' ages are consistent with those noted by [Variety](#), which identified the key demographic for GoT as 18 to 49 years old. Together, this age range makes up more than 70% of the sample.

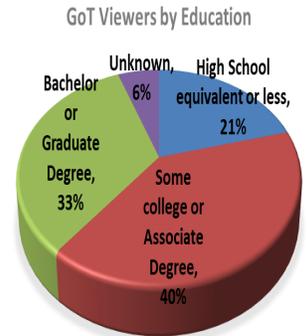
We have been unable to find a mainstream television series that matches GoT's ratings and breadth of appeal across age groups. Most have a younger or older audience, not both. The series boasts an IMDB rating of 9.5 on a 10-point scale! ABC's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. comes to mind when considering a mainstream show that rates high among young audiences (ages 21 – 34) in particular. The action packed, science fiction series approaching its sixth season, has a rating of 7.5 with approximately 2.3 million viewers. It has been twice nominated for an Emmy in the visual effects category only, suggesting that story and depth of characters do not explain the show's appeal. Instead, its staying power is its ability to draw advertising revenue and its possibilities for syndication.

On the older side of the age band is ABC's Castle. The under-rated show is about a writer who partners with a female detective to develop material for his novels, but he falls in love with her along the way. The series ran for 8 seasons, and won Emmys for music, People's Choice awards for Favorite TV Drama, and TV Guide awards for acting. A high quality show with an IMDB rating of 8.5, it pulled strongly among [45 – 64 year olds](#). Recently cancelled, the show enjoys syndication and is still quite popular. But in short, nothing comes close to the broad appeal of the Game of Thrones series.

More than 3/4th of survey respondents indicated they had at least some college education (see Chart 5). Interestingly, Game of Thrones is often described as one of the smartest shows on television, "[\[So\] smart, in fact, that it can be hard to follow.](#)" While the educational attainment of the largest audience segment in the sample has some college level education, a fifth of viewers indicated they have attained something less (see Chart 4). This suggests that the show's audience is not monolithic and it has something for everyone.

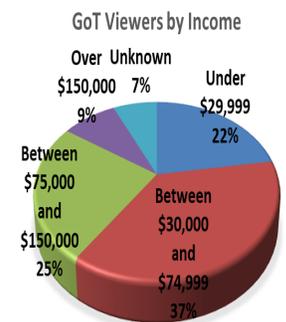
These bands comprise 22 and 25 percent, respectively, further indicating the show's appeal across income groups. The culmination of the sample's demographics points to Game of

Chart 4



More than 3/4th of respondents indicated they had at least some college education. Interestingly, Game of Thrones is often described as one of the smartest shows on television, "[\[So\] smart, in fact, that it can be hard to follow.](#)"

Chart 5



Just over 1/3rd of survey participants are in the middle-income area ranging from \$30,000 to \$74,999. Nearly as many have incomes of less than \$30,000 as between \$75,000 and \$150,000.

Game of Thrones... (continued)

Thrones as having a very broad appeal, spanning age bands, education segments, income, and grabbing the interest of both men and women.

Critical Acclaim

*The critical acclaim of cinematic work is one standard of measure for assessing a film or television production. It manifests in awards and positive reviews that essentially validate the quality of the story being told, the depth of the characters, and the strength of the acting. It stands to reason then that a successful production is one that garners a lot of prestigious awards. Awards are the film and television industry's nod to the strength of a show or movie's critical elements. GoT has won numerous prestigious awards over its 7-season run: a Golden Globe for acting and multiple Emmy awards for Outstanding TV Drama Series, acting, production design, music composition, and visual effects just to name a few. The show's accolades are reminiscent of drama series like AMC's *Breaking Bad* (5 seasons), Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (3 seasons – still running), ABC's *Scandal* (7 seasons). Like GoT, *Breaking Bad* and *The Handmaid's Tale* won multiple Golden Globes for Best TV Series and best acting performances and all won Emmys in all or some categories, including Outstanding Drama Series, writing, acting, cinematography, production design, and others. Baffling is a notable series like HBO's *The Wire* (5 seasons), which was only twice-nominated for Emmys for writing and received no Golden Globe and Emmy nominations for the tremendous acting. The show's IMDB rating is 9.3 out of 10, second in this group only to GoT which has a 9.5. One journalist described it as "[the greatest television \[program\] ever made.](#)" The explanations for this absence of tangible critical acclaim is still being debated 10 years after the show's series finale. Nonetheless, accolades such as these attest to the critical acclaim of these shows. But do the tastes of viewers support the industry's notions about GoT?*

Audience Appeal

As shown in Exhibit 1, the most interesting and poignant finding from the survey is how respondents described GoT's appeal for them. The sizes of the words convey their relative frequency in the responses. The largest term is 'characters,' suggesting this as the single, most prominent element that grabs their interest. [Critics often laud the complexity of the characters](#) in GoT. Arya's character, for example, defies her expected role to marry royalty and instead becomes a fighter determined to avenge her family. And Daenerys, who began as a victim and over time built an army and nurtured dragons, now wields undeniable power. The depth of the characters and their transformation over the series resonate with the experiences and aspirations of many everyday people who strive for strength and courage. There is also the cunningness of Littlefinger; the immaturity of Joffrey; the brutality of Ramsay; and even the gentility and loyalty displayed by Tyrion and Jorah. Not only can viewers relate to this in terms of what they see, hear and in some cases experience every day, this breadth of characters in the series reinforces the idea that the show has something that appeals to everyone.

Second in the exhibit are 'storyline' and 'story,' indicating their high importance for respondents. GoT is a story of race, gender, politics, and the wielding of political and military power to conquer. Examples of these are: the ruthlessness practiced by those in power to keep it and gain more; dark skinned people brought out of bondage by a blond, white woman; young and older women in power like Sansa and Cersei, respectively. Viewers can connect with these elements in large part because they are relevant today. But as I wrote in an earlier publication, cinema has historically been tied to the

Game of Thrones... (continued)

planned to decorate their homes and/or wear GoT-themed costumes for the viewing, which exemplifies the degree to which entertainment in general provides for escape from everyday routines. With sports, some fans wear jerseys, guzzle hats and paint the team's colors on their faces to immerse themselves into the event. With cinema, some viewers carry props and don period clothing and costumes imitating those worn in a film or show. Star Wars and GoT are just two examples of this.

More than half of respondents who indicated they were likely to watch the premiere planned to watch it with friends and/or family and many were preparing for its airing much like football fans do for the Big Game. They shared plans to prepare meals, and 4 out of 10 indicated they were somewhat likely to very likely to purchase a big screen television for the event – a [fairly common phenomenon for the Big Game](#). A handful indicated they would binge on the previous episodes to build excitement for what's to come in the season 8 premiere.

In addition to show loyalty, the constant media buzz about GoT spurs its anticipation even before trailers of the premieres are released. For example, a simple search of Game of Thrones articles yielded more than 209 million results. Even if half of these were duplicates, the sheer number demonstrates the wild popularity and interest in the show by journalists, scholars and yes, even laypeople. By comparison, a search of The West Wing yielded 126 million and AMC's Mad Men (8 seasons) 150 million. GoT-related publications were exceeded only by the AMC series, Breaking Bad (5 seasons), which had 241 million hits, ABC's Scandal (7 seasons) 336 million and HBO's The Wire (6 seasons) with a whopping 389 million. College courses have been developed to explore the cultural success of GoT as well as The Wire, and many academics have commented on the appeal of Scandal.

Conclusion

The findings here suggest that the tastes of today's audience do indeed align with those of Hollywood's independent sector of yesterday and that story is the point of intersection. The multi-generational appeal reinforces this along with the use of terms like 'characters,' 'story,' 'storyline,' 'action,' and 'plot,' to pinpoint the elements of the show that account for their interest and enjoyment. Viewers simply have a strong affinity for the characters depicted in the show and the quality of the story unfolding on the screen, consistent with the aesthetic priorities articulated by the development executives I spoke with 20 years ago. We can say then that these qualities are enduring aspects of a cinematic work in that they stand the test of time. Then, now and very likely in the future of cinema, these elements will be the factors by which the potential viewership and critical acclaim of an independent film or television series are predicted. The fact that many viewers can enjoy these original programs commercial-free and in the comfort of their own homes with family and friends is a bonus.

Indie contrasts sharply with mainstream works that pull in audiences with the implied promise of adrenaline rush through action, splash, quick cuts, brief interactions among characters, popular music genres, often cartoonish characters, and recognizable actors with fantastic bodies who appear in the presentation. This strategy has worked for the majors over the past 60 years or so, and particularly since the advent of home computers, mobile phones, DVRs, and DVD players. These technologies have made tickets easy to buy and shows easy to record and rent. A small lot of these works are truly enjoyable. Indie film and television series, however, offer something different. And it is clear from this analysis that its appeal exists across multiple segments of people, and story and characters serve as the threads that connect them.

For more details on the survey and enhanced charts and exhibits, please go to [About the Data](#).

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Editor: Chris Chaisson

A PhD sociologist with market research certifications, Reba Chaisson (Principal) is a published researcher who employs qualitative and quantitative methods in her primary research, including focus group, in-depth interview, ethnography, and survey. A recent assessment concluded that her greatest strengths lay in her “ability to keep things in order even when it gets hectic...and [in bringing] projects to successful conclusions.” So, whether you’re seeking a strategic alliance with the right partner or a special skill set in research and analytics, SRS can help.

You can contact Reba at reba.chaisson@simplyresearchsvcs.com. She is looking forward to speaking with you!

Research is... (continued)

level of passion and emotion about an aspect of the product or service (good or bad).

The qualitative data from “shop-alongs” and focus groups can be further supported with surveys. Surveys measure the frequency of the experiences and sentiments shared in the qualitative piece and shed light on the extent of their prevalence among the customer base. When the findings from the work are synthesized, they can lend phenomenal insights that help senior management craft strategies for communicating effectively with the customer and delivering an improved experience.

The research methods discussed here are not exhaustive, but they do exemplify the value of a mixed-method research approach for understanding the customer’s journey in exploring and purchasing products and services. Together, they inform and help navigate the business’ own journey to get to know their customer and move to the point where the two are best friends. People like to spend time with their best friend. Their best friend is often top of mind. They like that their best friend takes an interest in them, understands their tastes and preferences, and respects their input. These are the ingredients to a good and long-lasting relationship, to customer loyalty.

With its numerous and varied complementary tools, a good research design can be extremely valuable in providing a pathway toward bringing these two sides together. Along the way, customer satisfaction scores rise, and the business realizes increased sales and looks forward to longevity and prosperity in its industry.