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Academic Editors
Lothar Mikos (Free University of Berlin)
Susanne Eichner (Film University Babelsberg)

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EDITORIAL

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Editorial: Redefining Televisuality—Programmes, Practices, and Methods

Susanne Eichner [1] and Lothar Mikos [2]

[1] Department of Media Studies, Film University Babelsberg, Germany
[2] Institute for Media and Communication Studies, Free University of Berlin, Germany

Correspondence: Susanne Eichner (s.eichner@filmuniversitaet.de)

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Abstract

This thematic issue updates John T. Caldwell's concept of televisuality in response to digitalization, globalization, and streaming platforms like Netflix. It explores how traditional television, social media, and streaming intersect, reshaping audience practices, aesthetics, and cultural discourses. Key topics include binge-watching, meme culture, and the impact of datafication and global content. Case studies from Chile, Costa Rica, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, and the US illustrate the evolving media landscape.

Keywords

audiences; convergence; drama series; Netflix; social media; streaming; television industry; televisuality

1. Introduction

Thirty years after John T. Caldwell's publication on "televisuality" (Caldwell, 1995), television as a medium has changed radically. The processes of digitalization have had a wide impact not only on the technological infrastructures but on media industries with new players, market dynamics, and global and transnationally operating media companies; on audiences that are increasingly fragmented, personalized, and datafied; on media practices that are more individualized, mobile, and scattered across screens; on media products that reach beyond linguistic regions and follow new transnational flows of distribution. Television can be considered a transitional medium, as a medium in constant transition, caused by technological change as well as the associated political, legal, and economic frame conditions. Within this situation, streaming platforms such as Netflix can be seen as "re-invention of television" (Jenner, 2018). Televisuality is therefore still a topical concept in the 21st century but needs to be rethought.

In the early 1990s, US networks' competition with cable and their fight for economic survival gave rise to Caldwell's original concept of televisuality as a strategy to address the changing conditions. The concept addresses industrial dynamics, technological developments, aesthetic forms, and cultural discourses. In today's media landscape, social media, YouTube, and streaming platforms compete for audience attention across different global and local markets and media systems with effects on aesthetics, economies, and production. It has led to a convergence of formerly separated markets and industries as well as strategies and positions (González-Neira et al., 2022; Jenkins, 2006; Meikle & Young, 2017; Sparviero et al., 2017). Increasingly, traditional broadcasters are rethinking their mono-platform, -distribution, -device strategy in favour of a multiple approach with regard to distribution channels, devices, as well as content. Even if the concept of convergence can be viewed critically (Fagerjord & Storsul, 2007), it remains an important metaphor to describe the complex structure of different media, their content, and their audience.

Digitalization, globalization, and the resulting new market dynamics have impacted the development of television content and aesthetics. We have witnessed an overheated content competition, resulting in an increase in high-end quality serial narration and the "streaming wars" (Lobato & Lotz, 2021) that peaked in 2021, followed by a financial crisis and a decline in expensive high-end productions. "Peak TV has peaked" stated *The New York Times* accordingly (Koblin, 2022). Content providers readjust to the new situation towards also offering cheaper as well as innovative content that meets the needs of a new media generation, socialized with short clips and a user-generated meme culture (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). At the same time, the influence is not one-sided: The logics of the "old" medium of television are increasingly adopted by social media with its flow of endless scrolling (Faltesek et al., 2023) or Netflix and its turn towards event-oriented formats and sports (Ćitić, 2024). Television as a cultural form (Williams, 1974) outlasts technological and economic changes in an era of digitalized and economic convergence.

While digitalization and datafication processes currently propel changes, television has never been a fixed concept but has always been characterized by rapid developments. Already in 2004, Lynn Spigel discussed the "phase that comes after TV" (Spigel, 2004, p. 2) and pointed towards changing technological, industry-related, and governmental aspects that shape and change not only the face of television but its entire being. How can we, as media and television scholars, produce new insights and research perspectives on such a contested and fluid concept? As academic editors of this thematic issue, we propose to take John T. Caldwell's idea of televisuality that allows for a holistic view of the unique properties of television as an industrial product, technology, aesthetic form, and object of cultural discourse and audience engagement. The concept of televisuality designates a system of business conditions, styles, ideologies, cultural values, modes of production, programming, and audience practices that make up television as a medium within a specific historical and geographical context. As such, we suggest it is a concept that redefines television in its respective historical and societal context. For television studies, the concept of televisuality provides a rich and ever-changing prism for the analysis of its objects of study, as well as a constant challenge to our definition of the essence of TV as a medium and the question of how we can approach it both theoretically and methodologically.

The contributions gathered in this thematic issue discuss how the concept can be redefined within the contemporary context, where broadcast is transformed and complemented by streaming, where social networks are increasingly becoming video-based social media, where television texts are "unbound" and float as remixed cultural artefacts across channels, platforms, and media, and where the transnational

interconnections of the television and audiovisual industry, the conditions of economic and social crisis, and the changing audience practices are thoroughly transforming the medium. The thematic issue is largely inspired by the Biennial Conference of the Television Studies Section of ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association) held on October 25–27, 2023, at the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF, in Potsdam, Germany.

Transferring the concept of televisuality from the 1990s to the age of streaming and multi-platform television, the issue opens with John T. Caldwell's (2025) reflection on the concept in times of over-production of so-called "PeakTV," to which streaming platforms have contributed. Particularly, Netflix has become synonymous with global/transnational streaming. With its global reach, it not only dominates global audiences but also the public and academic discourse on streaming. Michael L. Wayne and Deborah Castro (2025) discuss cultural authenticity as "Netflix Televisuality" and Frédérique Khazoom (2025) considers Netflix's local-language strategy within the logics of transnationalism and transnationally performed style. The significance of language and dubbing beyond Netflix is the focus of Simone Knox and Kai Hanno Schwind (2025) who provide a production studies perspective on dubbing, as the "machine" of translation has become more complex and globalized.

In the context of the datafication of streaming viewing, experiences have changed. With a study based on data donation, Karin van Es and Dennis Nguyen (2025) provide insight into the diverse and complex activity of binge-watching. A study by Ignacio Siles, Rodrigo Muñoz-González, Luciana Valerio-Alfaro, and Vanessa Valiati (2025) looks at practices of rewatching as a source of pleasure and comfort. Not only viewing practices are affected by the changing conditions, but social media platforms reuse and adapt televisual content, audiences communicate about televisual content via social media, and these social media are increasingly following the principle of televisuality. Ellenrose Firth and Alberto Marinelli (2025) conceptualize the algorithmic flow of TikTok as a televisual experience. Jana Zündel (2025) examines how social media adopts televisual content into "memeable" snippets and Kim Carina Hebben and Christine Piepiorka (2025) propose the concept of dis/array to understand the reorganization and fragmentation into snippets as a transformation of television.

The global distribution of content such as drama series and news has changed televisuality in terms of production, narrative, aesthetics, and interaction with social media. In addition, social discourses and societal developments affect the production landscape in the age of global streaming. Axelle Asmar, Tim Raats, and Leo Van Audenhove (2025) critically discuss diversity in connection to Netflix and the company's position between social responsibility and commercial imperatives. Berber Hagedoorn and Sandra Becker (2025) analyze the impact of the Audiovisual Media Service Directive on genre and cultural diversity in a European context, drawing on the Netherlands as a case study. Juliane Wegner (2025) provides an insight into televisual inequalities with regard to gender representation during Covid-19 in Germany.

Case studies from different global regions also broach issues of aesthetic and structural aspects of televisuality: Consuelo Ábalos (2025) contributes a case study from Chile, investigating how Netflix combines Scandinavian genre aesthetics with Latin American melodrama to appeal to Chilean audiences. By critically analyzing queer characters in scripted television series, Traci B. Abbott (2025) reveals the entrenched binary ideals of queer representations in US-American teen drama series. Andreea Alina Mogoș and Constantin Trofin (2025) present an analysis of the Romanian television landscape and changes in visual conventions during the past years.

Next to content-related, aesthetic, and structural aspects of televisuality, the contributions deal with case studies from different countries: Chile (Ábalos, 2025), Costa Rica (Siles et al., 2025), Germany (Wegner, 2025), the Netherlands (Hagedoorn & Becker, 2025; van Es & Nguyen, 2025), Romania (Mogoș & Trofin, 2025), and the US (Abbott, 2025).

The gathered articles shed light on the manifold aspects of televisuality in times in which several televisual media forms interact with each other. Traditional linear television exists alongside datafied, algorithm-driven streaming, social media, YouTube, and short-form TikTok. Audiences around the world use all these forms in different intensities and exchange ideas about them, in direct conversation in everyday life and on social media. We believe that the updated concept of televisuality can be used to analyze the technical and industrial dynamics as well as the aesthetic forms and cultural discourses in the datafied and global media landscape of the 21st century.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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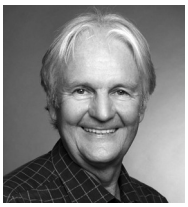
About the Authors

Susanne Eichner is professor in analysis and aesthetic of audiovisual media at the Film University in Potsdam, Germany. Her research focuses on the circulation of transnational television/streaming and on matters of representation and agency. Since 2020, she is chair of the IAMCR section Mediated Communication, Public Opinion and Society. Her publications include: *New Challenges in European Television. National Experiences in a Transnational Context* (co-editor, 2022), *Agency and Media Reception* (monography, 2014), and *Transnationale Serienkultur* (co-editor, 2013).



Lothar Mikos is professor emeritus of television studies in the Department of Media Studies at the Film University in Potsdam, Germany, and honorary professor of media and communication studies at Free University Berlin, Germany. He founded the Television Studies Section of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA). His main areas of work are global media and platform economy, digital distribution, transmedia storytelling, popular film and television genres and formats, and qualitative audience studies. His publications include: *Cross-Cultural Television Audiences in the Age of Streaming. Revisiting 'The Export of Meaning'* (co-editor 2025, forthcoming), *Film- und Fernsehanalyse* (4th edition, 2023), *Der politische Klimadiskurs* (co-author, 2022), and *Young and Creative: Digital Technologies Empowering Children in Everyday Life* (co-editor 2018).

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ARTICLE

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21st Century Televisuality? Golden Ages and Collateral Damage in Industry Stress Research

John T. Caldwell

Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media, University of California – Los Angeles, USA

Correspondence: John T. Caldwell (john@tft.ucla.edu)

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Abstract

This article examines how the innovations of, and fallout from, the post-1980s US multichannel cable era both prefigured and were transformed by the 21st-century online platform streaming era. Intense corporate competition, in which traditional networks and studios collided with disruptive new firms, triggered producers to innovate new ways of financing, making, and conceptualizing media content. Both disruptions spurred mergers, bankruptcies, hostile takeovers, and collapsing institutional distinctions. At the same time, these periods of acute market uncertainty also triggered widespread forms of innovation in production, technical imaging, narrative content, seriality, programming strategies, and aesthetics. So much so that the periods have been deemed "The 2nd Golden Age of Television," and a "European Television Fiction Renaissance," respectively. Yet traditional qualitative paradigms like these can also divert scholars who intend or need to unpack, document, and explain two more modest industry realities. First, acute televisual stylizing and golden age attributions gloss over television's and streaming's less-remarkable but essential and problematic industrial routine. Second, celebrating industrial exceptionalisms often ignore the creative media workers that disruptive innovations inevitably displace; or they caricature routine workers as a monotonous "rule" that proves the talented rise-above-the-pack "exception." I have tried to look beyond the vanguard masterworks in the two historical disruptions. My research focuses on habitual practices in production, in order to unpack the collateral damage, the "industrial ashes" that "media peaks" and masterpieces often (necessarily) arise from. Fieldwork and human-subjects research in media industry studies make it difficult to overlook the human costs and displaced workers that have followed in the wake of aesthetic and technical innovations in both periods. Drawing on the ethnographic fieldwork for *Specworld* (Caldwell, 2023), this article targets one problem scholars unavoidably face if they hope to account for the habitual, the losers, and the routine in worlds of production. Taking this approach makes justifying one methodological framework a precondition for scholarship: the *scope* of the evidence or data media scholars intend to "sample" in research on the immense complex production systems that characterize both periods.

As an alternative to the bracketed-off masterworks, "quality television" (or "cinemas"), and auteurs favored by arts and humanities scholars, research on complex media ecosystems requires finding a system-wide logic or basis for the evidence gathered. I argue that production rifts and fractures offer scholars unintended (unplanned and uncensored) self-portraits of what complex industries "betray" as most important to the system as a whole. In proposing "rift-trace data-sampling" for evidence I argue that industrial failures (rather than masterworks) act as unintended, even subconscious disclosures of key industrial practices. Triggered disclosures of this sort may offer a more convincing way to understand the televisual complexities—and system-wide functions—of golden-age digital innovations.

Keywords

creative labor; exceptionalism; media ecosystem; precarity; production culture; routine; stylization; technical innovation; televisual

1. Introduction

Media worker survivor accounts of barely "hanging-on" financially in 2024 echoed painfully after the media trades declared the collapse of "Peak TV" in 2022. Michael Wylie, an unemployed production worker waiting to be rehired for work on *Avatar: The Last Airbender* summed up the widespread pessimism: "We just came out of the second golden age of television and now we're in a wasteland....I have 25 years of experience at a high-level. Don't throw me on the heap just yet" (Keeps, 2024, p. E7). Interpreting production's widening labor depression, the Hollywood trades called out the culprit as none other than Netflix, which a few years earlier was praised for having triggered a decades-long boom in Hollywood's over-production of screen content. This well-funded new online competitor, in turn, alarmed TV and old media management into over-producing and over-financing their own quality content to compete with the new "streamers." That over-production continued apace, until Netflix saw its first quarterly subscriber loss in 2022. A precipitous drop in stock prices and scripted TV followed, along with series shutdowns and project-killing industry-wide labor strikes in 2023. Subsequent mergers and the layoffs of thousands of professional workers in 2024 drove the final nail into the coffin of streaming's Peak TV Golden Era in the US. At least for A-list Hollywood and its unions, the threat to livelihoods in the gig economy was ominous. As unemployed production designer David Blass from *Star Trek: Picard* cynically lamented in 2024: "Most people have been hanging on by their fingernails, and they're running out of fingernails. I know Emmy Award winners who are driving around delivering auto parts" (Keeps, 2024, p. E7).

An A-list era of Peak TV had arisen in Europe as well, but key differences are apparent, along with some striking parallels between the qualitative media peaks underway on both continents. As Barra and Scaglioni (2021) described, the 21st century media renaissance in Europe started not with Netflix and its competitors, but through major pay-TV competitors during the pre-streaming era. In addition, even though European production for streamers does now parallel the A-list content and screen-quality of America's recent TV/streaming golden ages, Europe's route to peak screen quality came about via even more transnational and decentralized means. European peak production, that is, was unevenly spread across the continent, in more diverse and geographically complicated co-financing and co-production arrangements.

2. Academia's Peaking Disposition

The peaks-and-valleys paradigm for culture is a centuries-old disposition in arts and humanities scholarship. In those academic traditions, two general practices incentivize the peaks-and-golden-ages approach. Academia's dark-ages-to-Renaissance framing (cycles of unexceptional norms vs. periods of exceptional quality) often follows from either: (a) a critical-curatorial posture in the humanities (film historians and critics cull formal evidence to showcase qualitative exceptions or establish canons via interpretive rhetorical argument); or (b) a juried-sourcing social science posture in media studies (journals employ blind peer review among specialist colleagues to establish exemplary media exceptions and quality cases that have disciplinary or industrial significance).

Before looking further into the scholarly and critical appraisal of the two 21st-century televisual media peaks highlighted in this essay (i.e., the Netflix-era-streaming-rise-and-fall described in Section 1, and the vast worldwide expansion of YouTube during its utopian Golden Age, pre-2017, examined in Section 5), an earlier media industry-disrupting precedent provides useful lessons for scholars as we try to understand 21st-century media peaks/renaissances and their aftermaths. I want, that is, to bring into view how the post-1980 "televisual" multichannel cable era in the US both prefigured and was transformed by the 21st century online Peak TV streaming era. In this 1980s production peak prototype, intense corporate competition, in which traditional networks and studios collided with disruptive new firms, triggered producers to innovate new ways of financing, making, and conceptualizing media content. This disruption spurred mergers, bankruptcies, hostile takeovers, and collapsing institutional distinctions. However, like other periods of acute market uncertainty, deregulation and increased competition triggered widespread forms of innovation in production, technical imaging, narrative content, seriality, programming strategies, and aesthetics. So much so that the earlier televisual period has been deemed "The 2nd Golden Age of Television" (Thompson, 1997). This historical framing in the US echoes the peak streaming era carefully researched and persuasively articulated as a "European Television Fiction Renaissance" (Barra & Scaglioni, 2021). Both framings located key factors and emerging conditions that earlier media critics and historians had overlooked or disregarded. Yet, if we look further into the industries described by these qualitative appraisals and golden age paradigms, scholars will likely run into industrial practices that do not easily fit within these frameworks. In the next pages, I want to unpack, document, and explain two more modest industry realities.

First, golden age attributions tend to look beyond television's and streaming's less-remarkable but essential and problematic *industrial routine*. Second, the industry's aesthetic exceptionalisms often ignore difficult *labor downsides*—including the below-the-line workers that disruptive innovations often displace. Or peak framing can implicitly presuppose that routine workers function as a monotonous "rule" that proves the rise-above-the-pack "exception." I cannot wash my hands of the scholarly oversights I have just critiqued, since my first book, *Televisuality* (Caldwell, 1995) fits the very industrial renaissance framing just described. Since that time, however, I have tried to look beyond the vanguard masterworks, more closely, at the two historical disruptions (1980s multichannel cable, and 2010s streaming). My research now focuses more on habitual practices in production, in order to unpack the collateral damage, the "industrial ashes" that masterpieces often (necessarily) arise from. Fieldwork and human-subjects research in media industry studies make it difficult to overlook the human costs and displaced workers that have followed in the wake of aesthetic and technical innovations in both periods.

Drawing on the ethnographic fieldwork for *Production Culture* (Caldwell, 2008) and *Specworld* (Caldwell, 2023), I target in this article one problem that scholars unavoidably face, if they hope to account for the habitual, the losers, the routine in ethnography. My fieldwork in these two books has forced me to better justify one methodological framework as a precondition for scholarship: the *scope* of the evidence or data media scholars intend to "sample" in research. This is especially challenging given the immensity of the complex production systems that characterize both the 1980s and 2010s periods. As an alternative to the bracketed-off masterworks, "quality television" (or "cinemas"), and auteurs favored by arts and humanities scholars, research on complex media ecosystems requires finding a system-wide logic or basis for the evidence gathered and framed-off for research, as I will detail in the pages that follow.

3. Industry's Peaking Disposition

The historiographic roller-coaster that media historians often create—framing off high peaks of creative accomplishment from periods of unexceptional routine—may spill over and serve the industry's very real short-term needs to find and lock down either company "best practices" or profitable, reproducible high-quality "prototypes" allowing them to survive highly-competitive, always-changing, media marketplaces. The industry and its executives have never waited on insights from scholars before taking on such risks or making strategic changes. Far from it. The impulse to isolate and to convince others of quality media "peaks" is not unique to academia. Media industries also have a long history and an institutional need to assert quality "peaks" for two reasons that have little to do with "aesthetics" in the classical sense of the word. First, all of modern marketing, promotion, and branding start from the necessary premise that a marketing campaign only succeeds to the extent that it can establish in the trade public's mind that the show, series, brand, or film is significantly different from all other films, studios, networks, or figures competing in that specific market or cycle. Artificially concocting distinction (or semiotic difference) is in fact a foundational imperative within consumer capitalism. No media marketing ever succeeds by selling a film, series, or company as blandly ubiquitous; or as no different than others in the same market.

Second, beyond any studio's individual requirement to spin and sell distinction, the industry invents media peaks as a more collective managerial strategy. That is, a media peak, once established in the trades, will ideally become less costly and more formulaic (i.e., profitable). That is, developing cutting-edge media is typically risky and expensive, but profitability requires that the studio in question must lock down and reduce the look/edge/trend into a less expensive (or at least more predictable) standardized formula to cut costs and allow wider financial returns, at least in the near term. Showcasing a media peak can become a marketing benchmark and production/distribution strategy for the (initially) risk-tolerant individual innovator. Organizationally, however, successfully exploiting and perpetuating media peaks often means finding production efficiencies for the new peak and then making that innovation routine—and thus monetizable—over the longer term.

With two caveats, first, acknowledging key distinctions between American and European media industries (described in Section 1), and, second, recognizing the contrasting disciplinary impact of diverging American and European research funding practices (discussed in Section 6), I hope, in this short essay, to reflect on some relevant ideas about research methods. These ideas pivot around questions of distinction and quality, which are adapted from fieldwork for my recent book *Specworld* (Caldwell, 2023), and are followed here with some reflections on the results of that ethnographic research. The approaches I take come from a career of

trying to research how and why aesthetic and technical innovation takes place in film and media industries at some points and not others. I have, that is, been unable to fully escape the qualitative shadow and mission of aesthetics (given my educational and professional origins in the arts). Yet at the same time, the sometimes vexing evidence on the ground in fieldwork has forced me to explain innovation and quality as the result of more complex and messy matters that go far beyond creator intention, formal accomplishment, and "quality" screen-content benchmarks. In short, my ethnographic fieldwork has forced me to deal as well with the infrastructure and human dark sides of the organizational systems needed to produce exceptional creative works, canons, and/or signature auteurs.

As I have recently argued, periods of innovation are inseparable from the system-wide stressors and rifts that produce them. Accordingly, the key to researching exemplary media inevitably requires looking at embedded system-wide behaviors of the media industry. That system-behavior approach requires justifying a researcher's scope of evidence based not on how the researcher selects evidence, but on how an embedded industrial system unintentionally "selects" evidence that is nevertheless, by definition, highly significant. "Data" disclosed in such "sets" are significant precisely because the industry or company no longer controls its data when faced with acute inter-trade and intra-trade rifts and fractures. Losing control of the trade informational system in this way undercuts the executive pillars that inform both corporate and brand management. Stressed industrial rifts, that is, often trigger a flood of antagonistic, multivariant (diverse) but nevertheless a highly-significant (intensely connected) forms of evidence (for the research sample or data set).

In the pages that follow, and given word-limits, I will start by introducing three concise examples of industrial stress points and fractures, offered here as brief illustrations: labor outsourcing, litigation over costly on-set lapses, and (in the conclusion) the labor threats from AI and onset virtual production. I have unpacked these examples and practices in much greater depth elsewhere (Caldwell, 2023). Building on these short illustrations, I will then elaborate more fully on another example, which I offer here as a more developed case study for this article. My primary focus, in that case, is on an inter-trade industrial fracture during one "media peak" in the rise of online social media platforms, known as the "Adpocalypse." I will then describe how the YouTube/Google ecosystem "managed" this uprising by its online creators (ostensible "partners"), and how the host firms eventually regained control of, and covered over, their creator uprising and fracture.

This case study of an industrial fracture in the online creator system, detailed in Section 5, provided a multi-scale data set of evidence that I researched through fieldwork, and then analysis, from 2016–2017. The Adpocalypse arose within what was arguably a "peak" era of expansion and success for online social media creators. YouTube (and its phalanx of formal, informal, and contingent affiliates) had to work hard during this crisis to regain control of systemwide creator volatility in what YouTube marketing had heretofore imagined as a sunny, reciprocal, and unified "media ecosystem." What had agitated the creators? YouTube's hidden algorithm had just secretly and abruptly defunded YouTube's own "partner" creators—through "de-monetization"—without any warning or explanation. Even before YouTube's official PR attempts to regain control, to win back its ocean of once-loyal but now angry content creators, the platform churned with a flurry of unsanctioned info from a multitude of (non-corporate) perspectives. I chose to frame this flood of diverse data issuing from an industrial fracture (much of it antagonistic)—centering its nexus point around a single day with a week-long trade show. I chose this period and location to build out an industrial rhizome or "network snap-shot," which I employed as my data sample. The evidence map that resulted was rhizomatic

and dynamic. It spotlighted both inter-firm crisis management and efforts by YouTube to realign creator behavior on the platform, with its brand.

Given this essay's word limits, and before returning in more depth to the Adpocalypse, I want to set the stage by offering two concise examples to illustrate several key research concepts in my method. Both of these examples are offered to define and underscore the productive possibilities of what I term "rift-trace-sampling"; that is, as a way to systematically handle and examine evidence in a media industry researcher's data set. For simplicity, in the following paragraphs, I will use the synonym "peak media" to signify what other scholars (including myself) may characterize as a media "golden age," "renaissance," "televisuality," "peak streaming," and/or "quality TV."

4. Industry Rifts and Fractures

4.1. Locating an Embedded Industrial Rift That is Researchable

Locating, framing, and describing a researchable industrial rift challenges the researcher in the early stages of a project to better conceptualize the subjects and entities that aggregate to comprise the media industry in question. Media industries excel when they cover-over their many internal differences to create a unified illusion of consensus in the trades. The same industries when threatened or stressed, however, can trigger their normally compliant workers into disclosures of damning "inside" information. These push-backs and leaks by workers provide openings into much larger and often problematic networks of interactions, that can be taken-up as research starting points. As one example, the worldwide shift to outsourced, subsidized, and flexible "off-shore" production labor triggered industry crises in many dominant film and media production centers. In 2012, workers and activists gathered in solidarity to pushback against Italy's legendary national Cinecitta film studios outside of Rome (see Figure 1). They launched the labor action to protest the studio's

Figure 1. Cinecitta' Okkupata labor protest, Italy (photo by John T. Caldwell, 2012).

downsizing and partial commercial redevelopment planned by management. Stressed fault-lines, like this one, during streaming media's highly profitable peak era triggered labor blowback in the film industry—even as (or because) the studios and networks involved continued to produce "quality" A-list screen content. The unsanctioned, often-critical back-channel info leaked and outed by workers about the industry challenged long-standing labor norms. The public rift also flagged suspect system-wide behavior in the complex industrial ecosystem that scholars could sample. Together with management's counter-attempts to resolve the dysfunction, the triggered flood of industry info provided a thick web of traceable connected evidence that could serve as a researcher's "data set."

Of course, using leaked, hacked, or back-channel disclosures by below-the-line workers (like those at Cinecitta Okkupata) can produce ethical predicaments for scholars—as well as even more (unintended) precarity for the creative worker/informant. As the next example will show, forced employee NDA's (non-disclosure agreements) and power imbalances (between management and workers or scholars) in the corporate sphere can greatly skew the ideal industry–scholar relationship. Yet, this potential institutional hostility does not mean that traditional protection of human subjects protocols and anonymizing informants are no longer relevant. Far from it. But changing the scale of evidence can mitigate the inability to employ traditional Internal Review Board protections. In particular, finding parallel corporate deep-texts and trade artifacts (Caldwell, 2008) to confirm findings and/or substitute for human subjects' quotes are more crucial for the scholar than ever. Accessing corporate or trade deep-texts through informants can prove equally (or even more) damning as critiques of the labor precarity managed by executives, than isolated anecdotes from individual workers. The Okkupata case forces the scholar to find ways to ethically study the struggles of individuals in precarious situations—even as the researcher traces out the cloaked internal networks that animate those struggles. The Okkupata case also underscores the necessity of system-based thinking, since the combination of sources I am proposing can actually help make problems visible that would otherwise not be addressed in interviews alone. In the next example of a researchable rift, unlike Cinecitta, studio management was largely stripped of its ability to control a different kind of industry's rift, or cover over production labor casualties.

4.2. Peak System Fracture That Executives Were Unable to Cover-Up

Litigious and prosecutorial disclosures represent another type of researchable fracture (see Figure 2). As I detail elsewhere (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 224–225), and elaborate in the next three paragraphs:

> This is because court cases involving production entities almost always result in the creation and distribution of written descriptions of actual onset practices, attributable quotes, and literal debates that dramatize that studios and networks are nothing like the cohesive monolithic brands they are marketed as.

Studios would never give access or permission to scholars—let alone to their own employees because of worker NDAs (Non-Disclosure Agreements)—to disclose the kind of inside proprietary information about the studio, that courts can legally force. Sarah Jones, a 27-year-old AC (assistant camera) crewmember was killed while working on a Jessup, Georgia filming location for the feature *Midnight Special* on February 20, 2014. Her on-set death:

> Exposed deep structural problems that had long been normalized and covered over by the production system as a whole. News that a CSX train plowed through the crew on-location on a bridge, killing Jones and injuring eight other crew members spread through organized labor media. A "We Are All Sarah Jones" movement quickly spread—visibly and symbolically—to other sets and productions across the industry.

Union social media jumped on the terrible news as crewmembers across the industry echoed and amplified the labor rift over producer negligence extensively in the trades. Law enforcement arrested and jailed producer Randall Miller, while the district attorney indicted three associates on voluntary manslaughter charges and criminal trespass. This felony prosecution was just the beginning. The production company itself, Film Allman, filed a lawsuit against its insurer New York Marine, since the underwriter refused to cover the company's financial crisis when the film project as a whole was closed down.

This prosecutorial and litigious fracture opened to daylight many otherwise back-channel industry debates about dangerous and pernicious production labor practices and management short-cuts. In effect,

Figure 2. The "We Are All Sarah Jones" on-set protests sweep across other productions. Notes: AC Jones' tragic on-set death triggers both felony indictments and civil cases against the producers and production company; as shown in the above photo montage from publicized court documents, OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Agency) reports, mug shots, location photos, slate solidarity messages, and crew protests on social media (photo by John T. Caldwell, 2018).

juridical intervention into Jones' tragic avoidable, on-set death worked to dis-embed production labor practices to scholars and the public alike. This forced breaching of "inside" information churned through four downstream channels:

> (a) social media creation and on-set activism by peer workers; (b) a criminal case, which produced 86 photos, recreations, and video analyses of the train trestle, along with investigative reports from OSHA and the department of labor…; (c) the considerable advocacy trade chatter documents that circulated in and around the civil trial by one legal firm or the other; and (d) trade publications. *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter* provided timely play-by-play reports on the fallout.

Industry trades are often the scholars' primary method for gaining access to production info. But beyond that, if triggered by legal fractures, the researcher can access other unscripted responses—oblique behind-the-scenes communiques, visual documents, activism onset, and social media trolling—much of it richer as evidence.

The rich array of deep texts and artifacts revealed much about labor conditions (long hours and precarity) and the habit of producers to take unnecessary shortcuts for budgetary reasons. Systems thinking helps us more effectively triangulate among all of these registers. The diversity of evidence dislodged in the Sarah Jones tragedy provides scholars a much more dimensional view of the deep links and webs of labor contestation that make up adjacent strata of embedded production sectors.

"Such shutdowns out and then freeze relationships in the public record. In effect, the courts that intervene publicize then embed the shoot's various coproduction relationships in study-able amber" (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 224–225). In effect, this on-location fracture and its judicial push-back gave scholars both a starting-point to sample evidence, and a complex freeze-frame of the many firms and sub-companies that presided over the disaster, including insurers, state film commissions, and government tax subsidies.

5. Online Creator Renaissance vs. Adpocalypse

5.1. Peak Online Media Rift That YouTube Tried to Manage/Defuse (Case Study: The "Adpocalypse")

The on-set tragedy and loss of AC Sarah Jones represents just the tip of the rift-disclosure iceberg in the production trade news cycle.

Labor accidents, lawsuits, indictments are part of the rift-disclosure info pool in production's trade news-cycle. I examine here (in more detail) a recent, larger-scale example of a continuing rift and scarp, specifically the "Adpocalypse" that shuddered through the utopian golden age of YouTube starting in 2017. In effect, YouTube changed the algorithm by which it ranked and recommended newly uploaded videos to other users (Figure 3). Most of the ethnographic subjects I talked with (2017-2019) viewed the Adpocalypse's defunding of their YouTube channels as:

> A major threat to their prospects for "scaling-up" or increased success on the platform. Since YouTube had earlier celebrated that it was "partnering" to share ad revenues with rising and successful YouTubers, the fact that the platform might no longer prioritize one's uploads as highly as it once did felt like an existential threat. YouTube's Partner Program now only shared ad revenues with YouTuber channels that

> had one thousand subscribers and four thousand watched hours in the previous 12 months. (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 231–232)

Creators complained widely that without warning YouTube's had unfairly moved the goalposts for their supposed "partnerships." This jeopardized the long-odds promise that creators would eventually have successful careers.

Figure 3. To protest the Adpocalypse, content creators threatened YouTube with "down-in-flames" videos, anti-NDA missives against multichannel networks, and "quitting YouTube" uploads (photo illustration by John T. Caldwell, 2017).

YouTube derailed even its good creators/influencers with its unanticipated and unwanted demonetization:

> [This] was especially troubling to aspiring creators who had planned to launch and build their careers around a growing subscriber base linked to automated monetization on the platform. Some YouTubers complained that their revenues had been cut to a fraction of their earlier income. Others complained that their new video uploads simply "disappeared" and were now never ranked or seldom liked. What perplexed many was that YouTube never provided an adequate explanation or description with any specifics about how and why it had altered the algorithm. After the change, YouTube made excuses, claiming that it now had to "flag" and "demonetize" racist and lewd videos uploaded by bad actors. Yet beyond that, YouTube simply posted sunny, vague announcements saying that it would constantly adjust the algorithm in the future to "improve" [its] helpful ranking and recommendation system. (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 231–232)

For many aspiring creators, YouTube's platform posturing (i.e., business as usual, only somehow "better"):

> [They] felt used and foolish, since they had (naively) assumed that they had been building a loyal financial partnership with the platform that was reciprocal. After the Adpocalypse, many remained unpersuaded and resentful. While many jilted YouTubers left the platform, others developed whole channels devoted to critiquing the perverse impulses of their YouTube masters. Some makers created and posted explicit burnout-and-quitting YouTube videos to mark their exit. (Caldwell, 2023, p. 232).

I considered all of this unsolicited creator content—much of it part of the organized push-back campaign—part of the rift's data sample I was researching.

5.2. Crisis Intervention: Regaining Control of the Hacked, Leaked, or Disrupted Data Hive

The converging media industries (streaming, film, TV, and online content creation) often behave as shape-shifting phenomena when examined under the researcher's microscope:

> Just as they complicate viewer and maker experience, those media no longer exist within finite frames or discrete distribution windows that scholars can easily isolate to study. Even a short time of observation in the field quickly reveals that any one type of media production is rarely isolated from other forms of production. These multiple systems invariably overlap, shadow, feed, alter, monetize, or manage the specific production practice that the researcher initially sets out to study. I tangled with one telling example of layered *embedding*, which dramatized how industry folds and congeals different production cultures within a common industrial space. A weeklong trade show named Vidcon 2017 challenged my initial assumptions. (Caldwell, 2023, p. 34)

YouTube's smack-down of its young partner creators (Figure 4) also challenged me to find an effective means to convincingly describe and map the boundaries of production cultures in ethnographic fieldwork.

A production culture's borders are not self-evident, even though above-the-line executives, and management "insiders" make it appear so. Therefore, if academics intend to research:

> (a) New online social media creators, for example, then they'll *also* have to account for cohorts of adjacent cloaked personnel embedded with them (fig.4). These suitors would include (b) the old media talent agencies that capably harvest aspiring creators and (c) the legacy ad agency departments in the game that package the necessary sponsorship and merchandizing deals that online influencers depend on. Influencers, talent agents, and ad agencies all employ different trade conventions. They pose distinctively in their own trade sectors, and each of these largely different groups makes media differently from the other. Yet here—via temporary social media partnerships formed in inter-trade contact zones and trade shows—the sectors are knotted strategically together. Trying to describe or feature any one production group (like online creators or influencers) in scholarship should also entail describing the group's position within the embedded system as a whole. (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 34–35)

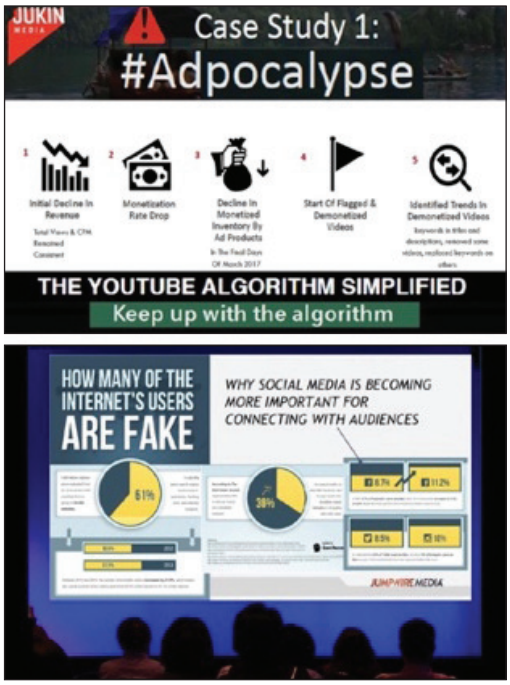

Figure 4. Making sense of the rift. Notes: What production approach makes any sense to aspirant creators when YouTube mentors tell them that "61%" of the internet users that creators upload during the Adpocalypse "are fake"?; jaded skepticism about the authenticity of anything online pervaded teen influencer pedagogy after the Adpocalypse; photos are public displays for workshop audiences by Jukin (top) and JumpWire Media (lower), at YouTube's Vidcon, Anaheim, CA (photo by John T. Caldwell, 2017).

This is especially true if one intends to employ a complex "systems" or "ecosystem" approach in research, wherein we need to describe and account for the worker's predicament across strata in the industry's power hierarchies; and across adjacent production cultures, on the set or in the editing suite.

5.3. Corporate Crisis Management to Mitigate Rifts in a Collective Trade Space

To counter the widespread blowback from angry YouTubers after YouTube had abruptly demonetized their once-profitable channels, YouTube/Google/Alphabet helped host a single hybrid in-person transmedia event at the Anaheim, CA Convention Center called Vidcon, with a week-long interaction of over 20,000 paying creator attendees in 2017. In doing so, Vidcon (see Figure 5) exposed for research a deep traceable cross section within YouTube's complex political-economic ecosystem. An in-person show and Q&A onstage at this trade convention by Link and Rhett of *Good Mythical Morning* (staged for the vast crowd of influencers present) proved strategic. The convention center stage, that is, was choreographed by YouTube in their attempt to "fix" the 2016 Adpocalypse fallout. Spotlighted onstage, the headlining show's showcase at the center of the larger rift of creators allowed me to isolate a clear research starting point. That is, the evidence I traced out from this "trade theater" nexus point allowed me to sample evidence in a way that was alternative to either "random sampling" or "cherry-picking" data. The Adpocalypse 2016 rift and the Vidcon 2017 response to it offer a fitting prototype for how translocalism, from anthropology (Appadurai, 1996; Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Hannerz, 2012), and chain-referral sampling—also known as "snowball sampling" in ethnography (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981)—together with "contact tracing" from epidemiology (Fetzer & Graeber, 2021; Heckathorn, 2002; Klovdahl, 1985) can be adapted as viable methods in

production studies research. More discussion about the basis for integrating both "translocalism" (from anthropology) and "trace sampling" (from epidemiology) as "rift-trace-sampling" in media industries research, that is, as a data sampling methodology, is found in *Specworld* (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 282–284).

The schematic in Figure 6 provides a researchable snapshot, an inter-institutional map that further details the odd and surprising network triggered when YouTube attempted to cover and contain its snowballing controversy. In addition, the platform exposed its complex roots for scholarly analysis in a single day (June 22, 2017). This diagram exemplifies "contact trace sampling" and disembedding analysis on one overhyped corporate attempt to "fold" and contain a rift between the YouTube platform and its vast numbers of precarious, cynical online creator "partners." Tracing out the links from this single nexus point exposes complex interconnections across firms and intermediaries.

The trans-firm map shown in Figure 6, an industrial snapshot-in-time, allows us to trace various ripple effects downstream in the embedded creator-platform. This ripple engagement is multi-directional, and, surprisingly, crosses at least:

> Four different—and *ostensibly competing*—corporate conglomerates: (1) the YouTube/Google/Alphabet system that hosts the creators (upper left); (2) the Amazon system and manufacturers that merchandize and monetizes the creator's spin-off products (uppercenter); (3) the CNBC/ NBC-Universal/Nasdaq financial trades system that covered and valued the event as a financial market in real-time (lower left); and (4) the Vice/HBO/Warner Media/AT&T conglomerate that makes its own opportunistic spin-off content. (Caldwell, 2023, p. 284)

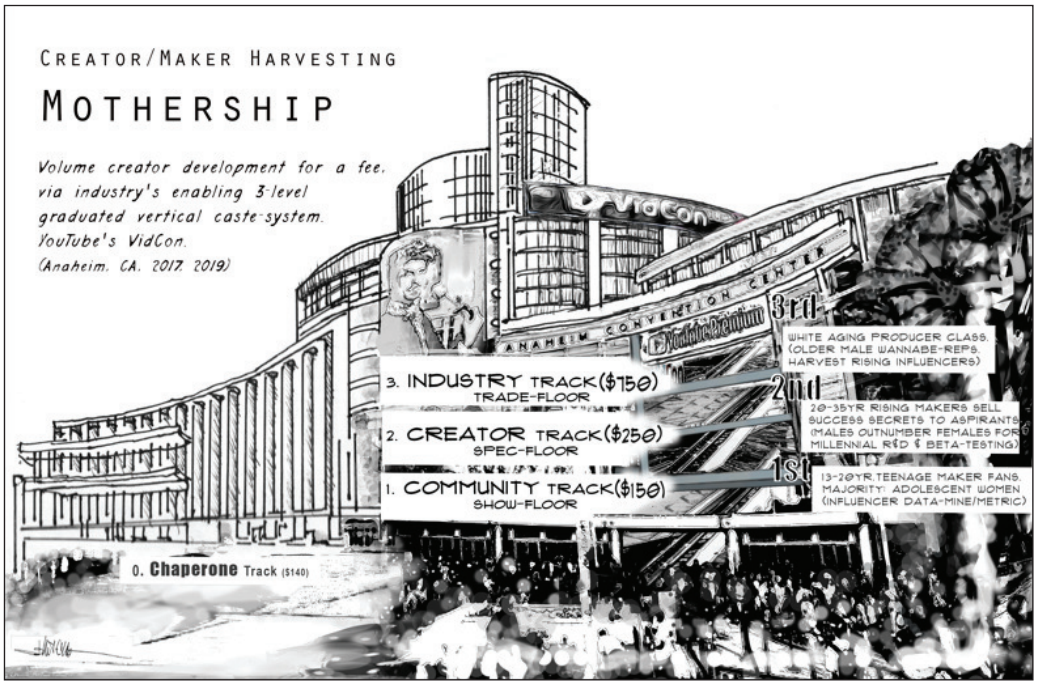

Figure 5. Three distinct online production cultures made up Vidcon 2017 (graphic drawing by John T. Caldwell, 2019). Notes: These cultures behaved like a creator-harvesting mothership; media industries are rarely monoliths since they regularly embed different production cultures together to create the illusion of "a" unified industry.

This ancillary media coverage included a news feature produced by ViceNews (Figure 6, upper right), that highlighted the posturing of the "independent hosts" appearing on YouTube's center stage at the convention.

In reaction to wide-ranging discontent among its individual online creator "partners," the CEO of YouTube appeared on a large screen above the main stage of the annual convention hall to soothe anxieties and suspicions among its immense young creator audience. The CEO's goal: to convince individual creators to have faith in the immense ecosystem, in that her platform's aims were neither predatory nor punitive. To act out its "transparency theater," YouTube booked one of its most popular creator channels (*Good Mythical Morning*) to stage a "live interview" (also streamed) with its CEO. This clearly aimed to establish the good intentions of the YouTube/Google/Alphabet ecosystem. It also showcased and outlined corporate plans for supposedly better (and more profitable) financial relationships with its hundreds of thousands of the conglomerate's individual, aspiring creator "partners." Yet *Good Mythical Morning* also mutually exploited the event to promote its own proprietary consumer products and activities within its normally very different Amazon media ecosystem. Because large media trade shows like Vidcon feign an ecumenical relationship across "the industry," other conglomerates stepped up to the event's content feeding-trough as well.

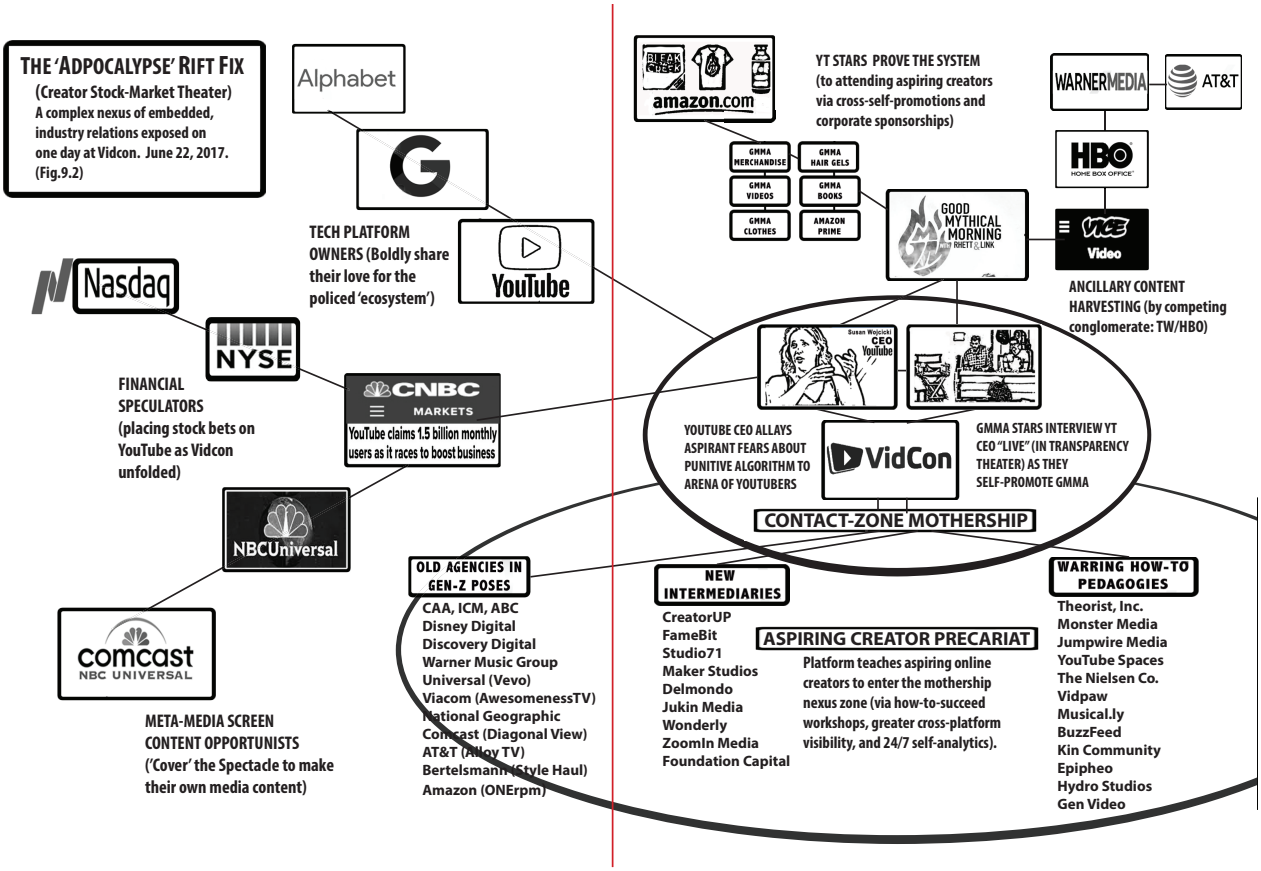

Figure 6. Rift trace sampling to research a vast interfirm nexus point. Notes: A method of creating evidence "data-sets" that are more disinterested to the researcher—even though the same evidence is highly significant to the complex industrial media system that unintentionally discloses or leaks it; rift-trace sampling takes an institutional "snapshot" of complex interfirm relations (triggered by stressed industrial rifts) for use as a research data-sample; to regain control of one of its large system's fractures, the YouTube mothership, with all of its corporate competition as de facto "co-participants"—attempts to mitigate, cover-over, and profit from the symbolic resolution of a rift with social media creators that it has first created. Source: Caldwell (2017; original drawing and photos from Vidcon17 Anaheim).

The NBC/Universal/Comcast conglomerate carried news stories about Vidcon and the future of YouTube on NBC. The Time-Warner/HBO/AT&T conglomerate had ancillary programs about Rhett and Link of *Good Mythical Morning* on their then-owned Vice channel. And all of this ancillary coverage unfolded as the Wall Street financial markets "placed bets" on the event's outcomes and YouTube prospects via business coverage in the financial trades and CNBC.

Yet these were just the standard suspects, the large competing corporate players hovering around the vast ostensibly unified trade ritual in Anaheim. Far more interesting to me were the hundreds of smaller companies attending the confab that were attempting to gain a foothold or increase leverage. These included many tech and content startups, along with the multichannel networks who fought against each other to sign up their own creator partners from among the trade-show attendees. But there were also scores of traditional companies, ad agencies, and masked talent agencies like Hollywood's Creative Artists Agency that appeared in stealth mode. They postured to the adolescent creator attendees not in their staid "old media" posturing, but instead donned Gen-Z personas that seemed to be far edgier and current than standard connotations of "old media."

Outside of the main event, Vidcon was equally active, churning week-long content creator hive, with hundreds of costly workshops mentoring thousands of aspirants on "how to make it" as an "online content creator." Scores of other "experts" panels taught hacks and tricks on how to program, monetize, and "scale-up" channels, how to co-brand and merchandize, including how to "hack the YouTube algorithm" for success. Many individual aspiring and rising creators also shared their thoughts on creator precarity with me as well. My goal in fieldwork was to better understand this industrial hive—through the human subjects and small firms involved—at a stressed moment of system-wide conflict. I tried, that is, to closely observe, describe, and map cross-sections of the stressed hive churn in more systematic ways. Only after I attempted to excavate, describe, and build some grounded theory (Somekh & Lewin, 2005) from this fieldwork, did I realized that what I'd actually done with *Specworld* was to write an ethnography not of online creators, but of mentoring, workshopping, and aspiration markets. This underscored that the subject for my research was a volatile media ecosystem that profits only to the extent that it can manage its complex scale and control creator unruliness.

Inside this transient, morphing web of corporations, frozen in time in Anaheim (Figure 6), YouTube/Google/Alphabet's self-dealing is far from surprising. Yet the de facto partnering between ostensible competitors set in motion at this vast convention undercuts the way media political economists normally clean up connections and harden corporate boundaries. This hardening process in research often dramatizes how each conglomerate expands (through ownership, mergers, finance) to gain more competitive market share, and thus increase control in industry sectors. In my fieldwork at Vidcon, by contrast, I tried to look beyond ownership and control. I tried instead to excavate and expose a researchable but more unorthodox and fluid network of non-conglomerate behavior that included competing content-scavenging corporations, jilted young YouTubers, talent- and content-harvesting competitors, wannabe Hollywood players, and exploitative bottom-feeder carpetbaggers from Hollywood.

6. Beyond Method: Why Stressors Research Matters Conceptually

My recent research fieldwork avoids the dismissive academic caste hierarchy in the commonplace professorial cliché—"those who can't do research, do methodology." I avoid the dismissal because many of the scores of

young humanities-based media studies scholars I have supervised have been challenged professionally to navigate an alien research funding gantlet created by rigid *imported* notions of "methods." Their innovative, often boundary-crossing, approaches to critical research (a round peg) were sometimes de-prioritized when forced by funders to fit probability-based definitions of media data sets and evidence samples (a square hole). One culprit? The common notion that non-probability sampling necessarily entails researcher "subjectivity" is false. That claim is a reductive caricature leveraged by quantitative scholars. The rift-trace sampling of evidence proposed here, and detailed in *Specworld*, is based instead on the system's de facto sampling—not the researcher's subjective choices. So, without appropriate institutional sanction, any critical media scholarship that hopes or promises to generalize or theorize about industry norms or qualitative "peaks" must *still* find and establish a viable way to prove why the evidence they've sampled is significant, justified, and sufficient.

The task is important for practical reasons but also for theoretical and intellectual reasons. This is because it is also imperative that we re-conceptualize the scale of the media practices we try to isolate and generalize from in media industry studies. Because the 21st-century media industries we research are immense, embedded, multi-scalar, complex systems—comprised of corporations, technologies, screen content, creative labor, and individual human subjects—we must pay more attention to justifying relationships between the evidence, scale, and scope of our research subject. Far from a technical question just about method, the task of describing the linkages between all of those interconnected differences in scale stands as a pressing intellectual matter for us as well.

To take on this problem in production study, I have adapted anthropology's chain-referral (Bernard, 2018, pp. 145–163; Coleman, 1958) interviewing method as a way to build-out the evidence sample in research. My longstanding aim has been to go beyond human subjects referrals and informant interviews. I have adopted this approach:

> To trace nonhuman interactions and organizational relationships, in addition to human connections….I use industrial fault lines and fractures as starting points in the sample, [in what] I term the method of rift-trace sampling rather than chain referral. Every crew habit and piece of gear comes with its own footnotes, de facto referrals, and interfirm relations. Even if they are not disclosed in written or verbal form, all technology and labor behaviors come packaged with their own specific technical genealogies, origins, instigators, and outcomes. As such, tech and operators form parts of significant networks (nonhuman and human) that can and should be productively tracked down and mapped by the scholar. Rift-trace sampling thus echoes Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), which distributes agency across human and nonhuman subjects in mixed systems. Good research can show how the object or practice in question connects directly to a specific, nonrandomized but delimited network of other practices, institutions, and contexts. (Caldwell, 2023, p. 285)

In general, my doctoral media researchers want to understand not probability, but something more interesting and thicker: industry's expressive behaviors, and how cultures of production are made and maintained. To get at these more complex non-quantitative goals, I encourage my doctoral candidates to account for and consider both of the institutional narratives of peak quality described earlier in the essay (academic vs. industrial) in their research. How, for example, does the industry's trade rhetoric of exceptional quality compare and contrast to academia's parallel legitimation (and often celebration) of television and media quality? How do those dueling or adjacent trade narratives reflect economic and sociological

behaviors in these communities? Both academics and media management play this game of attribution, as Newman and Levine (2012) detail. However, regardless of which quality meta-narrative my media studies PhD candidates emphasize (industrial or scholarly), one institutional influence from quantitative research, can overshadow them. Ill-fitting social sciences metrics can bedevil many of the younger North American media scholars and humanities PhD candidates that I have supervised who try to generalize, convincingly, about contemporary media industry trends (especially those with origins in textual analysis). Why? Even in the humanities, benchmarks for dissertation approvals and then for subsequent research funding invariably pivot around whether the candidate or applicant has employed a convincing enough evidence sample or justifiable research data set.

This research bias—appraisal favor given to the disinterested sampling of industrial evidence—however, flies in the face of long-sanctioned qualitative research habits in Anglo-American humanities-based media and film studies. Unlike Western European universities (which legitimize and fund disciplines more equitably) social scientists in the US (on research funding boards that I have served on) often dismiss media studies scholars in the humanities for their predilection to "cherry-pick data" or for the unfortunate way they treat evidence as unsystematic "apples-and-oranges" samples, chosen deductively, or for convenience in analysis. Research funding boards in turn expect or require more systematic, disinterested handling of evidence from emerging media scholars, than the traditional arts and humanities in Anglo-American universities have long normalized. Government research funding and corporate funding in particular—what Lazarsfeld termed "administrative research" (Babe, 2000)—both favor and fund scientistic "actionable outcomes," even for media studies. Yet, traditional media aesthetics in Anglo-American humanities disciplines never intended or produced such "deliverables" (since public policy or corporate practice were never seen as a valid end-point of critical arts and humanities scholarship).

Applied systematically, the method of rift-trace sampling I have briefly introduced in this essay, and developed more fully in *Specworld*, can mitigate potentially negative appraisals that the researcher has cherry-picked evidence to theorize some general point (likely known in advance). That is, the descriptive, empirical rigor of rift-trace analysis proposed here can preempt caricaturing of the research project as mostly "interpretation," as an act of hermeneutics. Both terms function as disciplinary straw-men. Such approaches are often dismissed as outdated humanities modes practiced by canonizing historians and/or innovation- or exception-focused critics. In short, faced with a mixed-scalar industry that is habitually opaque and dissembling by design and convention, "rift-trace (like snowball) sampling selects only subjects via self-defined relationships that the local system itself [not an 'interpretive' scholar or critic] 'deems significant'" (Caldwell, 2023, p. 285). In this way, in embedded, mixed-scale media industries, we look closely at how the complex system (often unintentionally) samples itself.

7. New Televisual Peak Media Stressors/Threats

For industry and scholars alike, the successive media peaks discussed here—1980s multichannel televisuality ("Quality TV"), 2010s peak streaming media, and YouTube's utopian era for online creators (2010–2017)—may all now have receded into the past. Yet the promise of peak waves keeps coming. Two other recent technical inventions, that is, are triggering yet another potential rise-and-fall moment in media industry quality/volatility. These new technologies signal the likelihood of another era of stress-inducing formal exceptionalism. This promise (or threat?) of newer quality content and hyper-stylizing televisual content

onscreen now comes in the form of OSVP (on-set virtual production) and AI. Both can be appreciated and reckoned with as potential stylizing-machines-on-steroids. We need to keep in mind that technology innovation breakthroughs and pending content peaks like these (Table 1.) regularly (and historically) have also collapsed job distinctions, caused layoffs, and spiked creator labor precarity on-the-ground in media production. Periods defined by critical acclaim about content alongside destabilized production labor are anything but exceptions (Figure 7). These strange bedfellows seem to partner in pushing industry's recurring rise-and-fall cycle.

Figure 7. An OSVP and AI-Golden Age? (new technology style-on-steroids disrupts creative production labor; photo by John T. Caldwell, 2014).

The new hi-tech threats are not entirely novel. In the pre-AI 2010s professional (but non-union) Visual Effects Society artists and technicians publicly protested "runaway" production subsidies (FX work shipped "overseas") that unsettled their employment. This blowback by artists became a transnational industry rift during online streaming's peak media era (Figure 6). By 2024, VES artists (*still* without unions or studio contracts) now face encroachment by and unemployment from other adjacent professional workers who have now used AI to expand their own overlapping skill sets. This AI-retooling outside of VES is meant to attract producers looking for ever-lower budgets. Producers, writers, editors, and directors can now spin out lots of non-textual imagery, including digital FX and sounds using AI. They defend themselves against claims of encroachment in the trades, usually by justifying their AI-use as "only pre-production." This misdirection by the encroachers, at least in the US, means that non-union production illustrators, set-decorators, carpenters, gaffers, and early career crafts-persons all face much bleaker job prospects precisely because OSVP and AI have cut-down crew sizes and location shooting.

Media trade sites in 2024, like *the Wrap*'s "Holding On In Hollywood" (Knolle, 2024) dramatize the now-widespread push-back and suspicion of AI by alarmed professional production workers. Not unlike the worker complaints in Section 1 about chronic unemployment caused by the "collapse" of prestige streaming in 2022, I conclude the essay with worker comments about the current grim prospects for future employment in the wake of OSVP and AI. Both OSVP and AI severely cut into and reduce a studio's or

Table 1. Peaks, innovations, and fallout.

Televisual peaks (each spurs content production)	Innovations [threats]	Collateral damages
1. US Multichannel Cable Era ("Televisuality") (1980–1992)	1. Government regulation/ restraint ends 2. New tech (digital FX [effects], nonlinear editing, Rank-Cintel, Stedicam, HDTV) 3. New labor (MTV, ads, film schools)	1. National network oligopoly ends 2. Broadcast three-camera studio mode marginalized 3. Rise and threat of non-union labor 4. Gig economy becomes dominant
2. Peak Online Streaming Era (2008–2020)	1. Netflix, Prime, new big budget norms 2. Transnational production, outsourcing 3. Trans-regional co-financing spike 4. New norm: online home viewing	1. Paramount, NBC can't keep up 2. Layoffs, strikes, de-unionization 3. Deep cuts in Hollywood studio budgets 4. Theater chains falter, recession
3. Utopian YouTube Expansion (vs. Adpocalypse) (2010–2017)	1. All production now self-financed 2. Integrated advertising/sponsorship 3. "Spec-work" becomes norm 4. Multitasking and manic uploading	1. Creators shoulder all platform risk 2. Creators corralled as merchandizers 3. Decline of unionized wage labor 4. Collapsing craft segregation/taylorism
4. The Televisual AI and OSVP Era (2022–2025)	1. Pre-visualization on steroids (AI) 2. Widescreen sets & "locations" (OSVP) 3. Generic music production on steroids 4. Computerized lighting design (OSVP)	1. Layoffs of storyboard artists and assistants 2. Location scouts and set builders obsolete 3. Composers and audio technicians decline 4. Gaffers, electricians, and carpenters decline

producer's need for the considerable work of traditional production design, lighting, and physical production. Benji Bakshi, cinematographer on CBS Studios' *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* wishfully ignores the darker labor implications when explains:

> [AI] allows me to experiment in a way where I don't have to be consuming resources or time—which is always precious on set….I've heard a fear that AI techniques can flat out replace people….The way I'm using AI to enhance my creative approach is a way that honors the craft. (Carras, 2024, p. A6)

This Hollywood cinematographer justifies and rationalizes his ancillary use of AI on-the-side (even while admitting the likelihood that AI might lead to unemployment in other production crafts) by invoking and leveraging a trusty kind of symbolic or cultural capital available to production department heads. That is, *his* AI somehow ostensibly "honors the craft."

Other visual production workers see AI's unemployment logic even more directly and starkly. In touting the magic of AI, Edward L. Garcia, costume designer on the FX Network series *American Crime Story* flags a nagging worry:

> We rely on illustrators as an integral part of our creative process in helping us develop and bring to life the images that we paint together in our heads….With the ability to type in any celebrity's name…and get an image of them dressed in minutes—that's like somebody's entire job. (Carras, 2024, p. A6)

Garcia, a successful costume designer, praises AI's visual brainstorming, while expressing anxiety about how his use of it may put pro illustrators out of work. Garcia marvels at what he's learned using AI during Hollywood's 2024 production downturn and unemployment crisis, but expresses anxiety about how he is now doing the job of another (potentially obsolete) craft category.

Not unique to art direction or production design, this conflicted anxiety about possible unemployment complicity extends into editing and post-production as well. In 2024 Julie Antepli, film editor on Netflix's *The Circle*, puzzled over the possibilities, including:

> The possibility of AI composing musical cues or creating scenes that would be impossible to film in real life….But the thought of that technology replacing the work of a composer or visual effects artist makes her feel "terrible." Immediately we see how some jobs would be affected. The problem is the cat is already out of the bag, and it's not gonna go back in. (Carras, 2024, p. A6)

Antepli, a Hollywood professional, helps rationalize the use of AI in post-production while admitting some guilt and feeling "terrible" about its impact on jobs. Her conceptual work-around that helps accommodate AI-induced professional unemployment? The new technology is *inevitable*, it is already here ("already out of the bag")—so production workers might as well figure out how they can take advantage of it.

Prematurely calling new cutting-edge technologies "inevitable," cuts out a considerable range of directions both production workers and media researchers might pursue, or questions they might ask about alternative arrangements. Scholars owe it to ourselves, to keep these options and questions, on the table. This independence is crucial, since many researcher questions (like creative labor precarity) are unwelcomed by corporate media and financialized technology firms. We can ignore or push back against the industry's preemption logic of inevitability, which attempts to script proprietary advantage into trade narratives about quality media. Such an industrial disposition is likely an end-product of evolutionary determinism and technical inevitability favored in the media trades. Taking on these industrial habits, and researching them systematically, might allow scholars to more fully understand, and unpack, the approaching cycles of televisual quality, media peaks, and industry golden ages.

8. Conclusion

From ethnographic fieldwork, *Specworld* (Caldwell, 2023) argues that fractures and rifts in creative production give scholars unintended (unplanned and uncensored) self-portraits of what complex industries "betray" as most important to the system as a whole. In proposing "rift-trace data-sampling" for evidence I argue that industrial failures (rather than televisual masterworks or peak media) act as unintended, even subconscious

disclosures of key industrial practices. Triggered or outed disclosures and stressors of this sort may offer a more convincing way to understand the complex behaviors—and system-wide functions—even of golden-age eras and peak media innovations.

Stress research, via rift-trace sampling, allows scholars to locate and more systematically unpack the inter-trade conflicts and disruptions that often spur innovations. That is, the method allows scholars to find parallels and make cross-craft connections. Labor stresses in adjacent sectors are normally covered-over or marketed-over by media industries since the industry profits by keeping its trusty traditional craft balkanization neatly concealed under an illusion of media trade consensus. Stress research functions therefore as informational anti-marketing. Stress research allows scholars to "change the narrative" or paradigm normally controlled and made monolithic by marketers, branding consultants, and publicists (talking points that in turn habitually script the trade press). Effective stress research ideally allows scholars to take back the meta-narrative from industry. That is, it makes it possible for the researcher to re-take the "bird's-eye-view" of industry away from the trade media. This is important precisely because the method forces us to identify key connections and interactions between the normally segregated crafts in the below-the-line creative labor world.

Some might question the wisdom of my employing complex systems analysis or a media ecosystems approach for research focused mostly on finding and mapping crises, rather than studying sunnier or lengthier continuities. Another potential issue is whether my approach risks the opposite extreme: narrating media industries in a permanent state of crisis and constant decline. I would push back against this criticism by reference to the preceding discussion. That is, I want to reiterate that there is a necessary push–pull between disruptive stressed innovation (forces that create peaks) and the subsequent reductive imperative to formulate the "rules" behind the peak so that studios can find budgetary efficiencies by making "quality" production "formulaic." The historical understanding of the necessary linkage between stressed innovation and reductive formulaic efficiencies in organizations is found in foundational film historiography, including the *Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell et al., 1985).

The build-ups and declines of the three hyper-stylizing quality media periods discussed in this essay—(a) innovative "televisual" US multichannel programming in the 1980s cable era, (b) innovative online "Peak TV" in the 2010s Netflix streaming era, and (c) innovative online "maker" era of the utopian YouTube era (before its dystopian Adpocalypse crisis)—all behaved like industrial "sugar-highs." Market stressors and over-financing pushed media aesthetics to impressive levels in each period. Thus justifying the televisual designation. Yet, the same rich stressors proved unsustainable for many competitors in the years of "withdrawal" following each high. We need to take the declines and losers of each golden age as seriously as we do the winners. Winners, after all, at least statistically, are not, by definition, symptomatic of anything.

Collateral damage within the creative labor workforce (which is often off-the-radar for scholars) does as much to explain each golden era discussed here as do invocations of top-down corporate design or intentionality. Certainly, collateral damages offer more than the monolithic board-room pretensions of market control which are scripted into executive talking points and a production's financial prospectuses. Along with a studio's PR crisis interventions and brand-management vigilance, all of these workaday corporate practices function as forms of self-serving speculation. In some ways, most of the corporate media's preemptive mythologizing about quality peaks occludes the actual creative work of a vast number of key human subjects on the ground.

These "top-down" proprietary trade narratives, from the executive suites, challenge scholars to examine such practices, and their downsides, more closely. Taking this approach may help us better understand and explain future industrial high-points of televisual, peak media, or golden ages in media (AI and OSVP), along with their shadow downsides (outsourcing, unemployment, and obsolescence).

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About the Author

John T. Caldwell, UCLA distinguished research professor, Cinema & Media Studies, received the SCMS Distinguished Pedagogy Award (2018); two NEA fellowships (1979, 1985); a Bauhaus University fellowship (2012), and an Annenberg senior fellowship (2012). His books include: *Specworld* (UC Press, 2023), *Production Culture* (Duke, 2008), *Televisuality* (Rutgers, 1995), *New Media: Digitextual Theories* (Routledge, 2003), and *Production Studies* (co-edited, 2009). A retrospective of his award-winning films *Rancho California* (2002), *Land Hacks* (2020), and *Freak Street* (1989) can be found at https://vimeo.com/showcase/11426869

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ARTICLE

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Cultural Authenticity as Netflix Televisuality: Streaming Industry Discourse and Globally Commissioned Original Series

Michael L. Wayne [1] and Deborah Castro [2]

[1] Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands
[2] Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Michael L. Wayne (wayne@eshcc.eur.nl)

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Abstract

This analysis uses a media industry studies approach in conjunction with Caldwell's concept of "televisuality" to explore the significance of cultural authenticity within Netflix's industrial discourses. The authors argue that Netflix's emphasis on cultural authenticity in its global content strategies mirrors the concept of "televisuality" as a form of corporate behavior and cultural representation in the streaming era. Specifically, the findings demonstrate the ways in which cultural authenticity can be understood as an industrial practice, distinct from the specific textual, narrative, or genre-related elements of its content. In addition, this research finds that executives' assertions about universal storytelling diminish the significance of cultural differences, enabling them to present this diluted version of cultural authenticity as a catalyst for fostering global empathy and understanding. Yet, the broader utility of conceptualizing cultural authenticity as the overarching industrial logic of contemporary streaming television remains unclear as a result of Netflix's distinctive position within the industry.

Keywords

cultural authenticity; Netflix; streaming; television industry

1. Introduction

With more than 282 million subscribers in more than 190 countries, Netflix is the largest multinational subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platform in the world. As the company's global footprint expanded, previous scholarship has examined how SVOD platforms navigate transnational logics and glocalization strategies (see, for instance, Ataki, 2024; Jenner, 2023; Lobato & Lotz, 2020). Scholars have also observed

that geographically diverse content has become increasingly central to the streamer's brand image (Asmar et al., 2023; Elkins, 2019; Havens & Stoldt, 2022). Since the service's most recent global expansion in 2016, Netflix executives have consistently emphasized the importance of commissioning "local for global" series (Hopewell & Lang, 2018). According to Chief Content Officer Bela Bajaria, local producers working for Netflix are "extraordinarily empowered, local decision makers" who "make the decisions in their own time zone in their own country and in their own language" which results in the export of "local authentic stories and shows [to] everywhere around the world" (Ramachandran, 2021). From an industrial perspective, this emphasis makes sense as local distinctiveness and cultural authenticity are often cited as key factors in explaining the national and international success of contemporary TV drama (Sundet, 2021).

Netflix's emphasis on cultural authenticity, alongside the malleable use of this and related terms in industry discourses, indicates that the discursive functions of cultural authenticity in the context of streaming parallel televisual style during the multichannel transition in significant ways. Although Caldwell's (2020) conceptualization of "televisuality" is simultaneously wide-ranging and granularly specific, we are primarily concerned with his use of the term in reference to "an important historical moment in television's presentational manner" within which "televisuality has become an active and changing form of cultural representation, a mode of operating and a ritual of display that…is less a defining aesthetic than a kind of corporate behavior and succession of guises" (p. 504).

To reflect on the above, this article applies a media industry studies approach (Herbert et al., 2020) to data gathered from publicly available secondary data from sources such as trade press articles, popular press interviews, and Netflix's quarterly earnings call transcripts. This study begins with a brief discussion of scholarship addressing Netflix's content production and branding strategies and a discussion of methods. In the following sections, we examine the use of cultural authenticity in the industrial discourses of Netflix executives before making two related arguments. First, we argue that Netflix's discourses of cultural authenticity are a "stylizing performance" in that they are usefully conceptualized as "an activity rather than a look" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 8) which executives frame as a "structural inversion" (p. 9) of global television's traditional hierarchies. Second, we argue that within the discourses of cultural authenticity, the notion of universal storytelling rhetorically flattens the "particularity and partisanship" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 196) of actual cultural difference thereby allowing Netflix executives to claim the company actively fosters global empathy and understanding. In sum, the debate over whether Netflix's globally commissioned series uphold cultural authenticity helps assess the extent to which the platform challenges the standardization and homogenization commonly associated with traditional international audiovisual flows. Ultimately, however, questions remain regarding the utility of conceptualizing cultural authenticity as the overarching industrial logic of contemporary streaming television or if Netflix's particular attributes necessitate its ongoing characterization as "a zebra among horses" (Lotz, 2021, p. 196).

2. Netflix's Global Brand Identity

Netflix's strategic ambition to establish and consolidate itself across diverse international markets has become a defining feature of its effort for global expansion. This strategy hinges on the production of programming from a wide variety of non-US markets, consisting in collaboration with local production industries through commissions (also known as originals), co-commissions, and acquisitions (cf. Lotz, 2021). Cultural and linguistic diversification of Netflix's library has been celebrated by scholars such as Dunleavy and Weissmann (2023)

who see the purchase of TV dramas such as Welsh heist drama *Dal y Melt/Catch the Lightning* as evidence of the "increasing cultural diversity and specificity" that the platform offers to international audiences (p. 1). According to these authors, such productions "not only feature non-US settings and stories (some of them also using non-English languages), but also showcase a notable diversity of cultural perspectives and experiences" (Dunleavy & Weissmann, 2023, p. 2).

In a context in which global platforms facilitate access to content produced in different countries coupled with the international success of some of these productions (e.g., the Spanish TV drama *La Casa de Papel/ Money Heist*), scholars have begun interrogating some of the traditional assumptions regarding audience preferences, often associated with Straubhaar's (1991) conception of cultural proximity. Drawing on interview data with corporate financiers, policy-makers, and senior executives at production companies, Doyle et al. (2021) reflect upon how global platforms "encouraged changes in audience tastes and a growing appetite for locally specific material" felt by both international and local audiences (p. 182). Consequently, "contemporary tastes have become more cosmopolitan" as audiences embrace diverse cultural content (Doyle et al., 2021, p. 182). This idea echoes Esser's (2020) broader argument that, even outside of multinational streaming platforms, transnational viewers often find that the local specificity of foreign content enhances, rather than diminishes, its appeal.

Together with ideas of quality TV, binge-watching, and diversity (Jenner, 2023), cosmopolitanism seems to have become another piece of the ever-evolving Netflix branding strategy. Elkins' (2019) critical approach to the role that cosmopolitanism plays in Netflix's brand strategy deserves particular attention. He argues that cosmopolitanism has become a key element in Netflix's portrayal of its global reach and cultural influence. To be clear, by introducing audiences to audiovisual productions created by creators from different places and production cultures, the platform asserts its role in promoting "a cosmopolitan orientation toward the world" (Elkins, 2019, p. 379). A sense of shared taste that not only can be apparently grasped by Netflix's sophisticated data analytic systems but, also, has the presumed potential to connect people across different backgrounds. As Elkins (2019) adds:

> By claiming that the services help enable cross-cultural global community, they [Netflix] promote a benevolent vision of themselves to new markets while tacitly attempting to soothe anxieties about the platform imperialist dominance of a small handful of automated, algorithmic digital platforms. (p. 377)

Cultural imperialism has been, in fact, discussed by several scholars in the context of multinational streaming services. In this vein, studies conducted in a number of countries have documented the high volume of US content Netflix has offered (and still offers) in its catalogs (see, for example, the study on the Australian market conducted by Lobato & Scarlata, 2019). Netflix's high penetration rates in countries where English is the main language and the places where Netflix has located production facilities may help explain this dominance (see Lotz, 2021). The dominance of US content has sparked debates about the potential threats to the cultural identities of the countries where Netflix operates (García Leiva et al., 2021). Furthermore, Netflix's production of content in various countries and languages can be understood, on the one hand, as a response to this criticism and as a way to bolster Netflix's original production worldwide and, on the other hand, as a way to respond to potential regulatory pressures on its catalog (Albornoz & García Leiva, 2021).

In this context, the study of Netflix's branding strategies becomes crucial in understanding the streamer's production, distribution, and investment strategies. In the past years, various scholars have conducted textual analysis of Netflix's press releases, examining them from different lenses. For instance, Asmar et al. (2023) focused on Netflix's diversity strategy, which they define as the platform's commitment to representing "its audience in all its diversity—ethnic, sexual, or linguistic" (p. 25). The authors explain how this strategy has been central to the streamers' transnational expansion and economic goals, as well as in "influencing prevailing norms and narratives about what it means to live in multicultural societies (Asmar et al., 2023, p. 35). Discussions about Netflix's brand strategy have also been tangentially present in studies focused on textual analysis of streamer's content. Boisvert (2024), for instance, argues that such an approach "offers insights into a platform's content development ethos" (p. 1513).

Despite these contributions, little attention has been given to the role that cultural authenticity plays in Netflix's industrial discourses (see, for example, Wayne & Uribe-Sandoval, 2023). The lack of scholarly work focused on this term could be explained by the highly subjective nature and fluidity of the same. As Esser (2020, p. 23) rightly argues, notions of authenticity are "constructed on the basis of viewers' experiences, aspirations, social milieu, and the wider context in which viewing takes place…it is futile to ask how authentic something is. Instead, we should ask who considers something authentic and why." Aware of this, we argue that in the current streaming era, cultural authenticity has, however, the potential to perform discursive functions similar to that of Caldwell's televisuality. Hence, this article offers a critical discussion on how Netflix's executives use the concept and for what purposes. The next section briefly introduces the study's methodological approach used to reach this objective.

3. Methods and Data

A media industry studies approach (Herbert et al., 2020) has been employed to explore how Netflix's emphasis on cultural authenticity in its global content strategies mirrors the concept of "televisuality" as a form of corporate behavior and cultural representation in the streaming era. The study has analyzed 13 years (2010–2023) of Netflix's quarterly earnings call transcripts (n = 56) and letters to shareholders (n = 56), as well as trade press articles, press releases, and interviews from both trade and popular press. Given the specificity of the analysis, criteria sampling was applied during data collection. Two researchers independently searched press articles where Netflix executives referred to the concept of authenticity. This resulted in a selection of 52 different articles published between 2016 and 2024 in outlets such as *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*. To analyze the data collected, the study has worked with the so-called trade press analysis, an approach that has been extensively used by media and communication scholars (Corrigan, 2018; Johnson, 2017; Wayne, 2022) due to its potential to offer insights into industry dynamics and rhetoric. However, the focus on these types of secondary data for research purposes is not without limitations. For instance, Perren (2015) has highlighted the importance of recognizing the biases associated with trade press materials and Corrigan (2018) reflected on how factors such as irregular coverage and mystifying language can compromise the analysis. Adopting a critical lens is, thus, pivotal.

The findings have been structured into three sections. The first section discusses the importance that local authenticity has in Netflix's industrial discourses. It also identifies and reflects on the key aspects executives use to communicate such relevance, such as the popularity of a production in its home market. The second section reflects on how cultural authenticity can be understood as an industrial practice, distinct from the

specific textual, narrative, or genre-related elements of its content. The third section highlights how executives' assertions about universal storytelling diminish the significance of cultural differences, enabling them to present this diluted version of cultural authenticity as a catalyst for fostering global empathy and understanding.

4. "Local Authenticity Is Very Important"

In Netflix's industrial discourses, cultural authenticity is broadly understood to be a reflection of the local culture in which a series' narrative is situated. Within these discourses, cultural authenticity is discursively constructed as the result of a series' production, its reception, and its textual characteristics. Regarding production, Netflix global commissions become authentic through the national identity of the series' producers. Bajaria, who was promoted to chief content officer in 2023, asserts that local authenticity is an inherent characteristic of series created by individuals who are "from" the society being depicted. Discussing the company's commissioning strategy, she explains:

> We want locally authentic stories from whichever country they come from…and we have a global platform where people can discover those. If you look at *Lupin*, *Money Heist* or *Squid Game*—locally authentic stories told by people from that country, in their own background, have happened to connect with people who discovered them. (Bansal & Jha, 2022)

Minyoung Kim, Netflix's VP of content for Asia, similarly explains, "As we constantly say, 'local authenticity is very important.' And when we talk about local authenticity, it's the culture and the life that those people live that is really in that story" (Analyse Asia, 2024).

Netflix executives also discuss cultural authenticity in relation to a given series' reception. According to co-CEO Ted Sarandos, "The more authentically local the show is, the better it travels, which we've seen with *Kingdom*…fans of K-Drama around the world loved that show and it resonated incredibly well for us in Korea" (Netflix, 2019). However, Netflix is primarily concerned with global commissions' performance in home markets, not the global market as Bajaria explains. She says, "For all of this local content…the focus is always massive local impact, that's the most important thing. And if it travels, that's great, but we really want to make sure we are super serving the local audience" (Ramachandran, 2021). Kim similarly emphasizes the importance of local content in its home market, noting, "Local authenticity is really important" (Campbell, 2023). She continues, "If a show really works in that country but does not travel outside, that's still great for us. What we don't want is a show that does not work in that country but works outside."

Regarding the textual characteristics of global commissions, these series are culturally authentic because they have not been "watered down" for the global market. Discussing Netflix's overall approach, Sarandos explains, "We don't try to make it—water it down or make it travel any better inorganically and have found that the best way to make global stories is to make them incredibly, authentically local" (Netflix, 2019). As this example indicates, when discussing cultural authenticity, Netflix executives say very little about the local/national culture. Sarandos' discussion of *Lupin* is characteristic of this frustrating tendency. He says:

> And the great thing about that is those stories that are coming from all over the world, like we saw with *Lupin* this year, this quarter, it was our biggest new series on Netflix in the world was *Lupin* from France. And the show was not like a watered-down French show. It was a very French show. (Netflix, 2021b)

Nothing is said here about what makes *Lupin* a French show other than it was filmed and set in France. As Lotz and Potter (2022) note, *Lupin* is a useful example of a "placed" show. They observe, "We see France, but little of French culture. The intrigue at the center of the story could just as well be placed in Moscow, Berlin, or Taipei with equivalent national signifiers easily exchanged" (Lotz & Potter, 2022, p. 689).

In the context of this analysis, however, evaluating the veracity of executives' claims regarding the cultural authenticity of Netflix global commissions is beside the point. As Caldwell observes regarding television during the multichannel transition that "self-consciously rejects the monotonous implications of the flow and the conservatism" of network-era content, "whether or not televisual shows actually succeed in providing alternatives to this kind of stasis is not the issue. What is important is that they promote special status and pretend to both difference and change" (2020, p. 29). It is this pretense of difference that marks Netflix's industrial discourses and it is within these discourses that cultural authenticity begins to appear as "a linchpin of corporate psychology, an organized frame of mind that keeps the industry's programming machine churning" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 434).

5. "Everything Starts Local"

In this section, we argue that Netflix executives discursively construct cultural authenticity as an industrial activity that exists apart from any particular textual, narrative, or generic feature of its content. This construction relies on two related claims: There is no such thing as a "Netflix" show and Netflix subscribers can be characterized by the breadth of their taste. Framed by the lack of a traditional television network branding (Johnson, 2012) and the supposedly eclectic demands of their audience, executives position cultural authenticity as the trait that links all Netflix-commissioned series regardless of genre. This, in turn, allows executives to claim that the streaming service successfully inverts the historical relationship between Hollywood and global audiences in multiple ways.

In contrast to cable channels like HBO and AMC, Netflix never established a brand identity connecting a particular type of content to a specific audience segment. When directly asked about this in 2016, Sarandos replied:

> Our brand is personalization. That's the key, so I can't go too far off of that. What I really said at the beginning (was) we didn't want any show to define Netflix. And we didn't want Netflix to define any one of our shows. So it really is about what people's tastes are. (Sepinwall, 2016)

Two years later, Sarandos was even more explicit, telling an interviewer, "There's no such thing as a 'Netflix show'" (Adalian, 2018). More recently, Bajaria echoed this idea to an industry audience explaining that it makes little sense to ask, "What makes a Netflix show?" (Littleton, 2024). She continued, "We can't define ourselves narrowly, even though many of you would always like us to. But we can't. We have to think much more broadly about who's watching and what they want." Indeed, Netflix's original content includes series and films that span 14 headline genre categories such as Anime, Horror, and Sports (Moore, 2024).

Yet, discursively, Netflix's no-brand branding exists in a tautological relationship with their claims about the needs of their audience. As Sarandos explains, "People have such different and eclectic tastes that you can't afford to program for just one sensibility. You have to love it all—prestige dramas, indie films, true crime,

romantic comedies, stand-up, documentaries and reality TV" (Sarandos, 2024). So according to executives, Netflix's lack of a traditional television brand identity reflects their audience's broad tastes which are in fact so broad that they could not possibly be contained within one coherent brand identity.

However, it is within this discursive context that cultural authenticity becomes central to Netflix's industrial activity. According to Sarandos (2024), in the years following Netflix's international expansion, the company "learned that everything starts local." Bajaria elaborates, "Television, film starts with being very culturally specific and very authentic. If you try to make a show for everyone, you make a show for no one" (Thomas, 2024). Other executives also reference the supposed futility of creating content specifically for the global market. According to Francisco Ramos, VP of content for Latin America:

> We've learned that it's a mistake to try and cater to a "global" audience….If you try to make a film or a series that appeals to everyone, you typically end up with something generic or bland that appeals to no one. (Littleton, 2024)

In repeating these claims of cultural authenticity, Netflix executives are reproducing well-established industry logics. As Caldwell observes of network executives in the 1980s and 1990s, "The primetime television mill imagines that very much of what it makes—or wants to make—is special and distinctive signature programming" (2020, p. 434).

It is here where the stylizing performance of cultural authenticity as Netflix's central industrial practice begins to incorporate the structural inversion (Caldwell, 2020, p. 9) of global television's traditional hierarchies. Specifically, Netflix executives frame the processes by which the streaming service commissions and produces local content as one that inverts the historical relationship between Hollywood and the global audience. In some instances, the hierarchies being inverted remain implied. When meeting with Israeli film students, for example, Sarandos says, "We're looking for local, authentic stories. Language is not a barrier for us, some of our biggest hits are non-English, including *Squid Game*, *La Casa* and *Lupin*" (Brown, 2022). The implication here is that for some unnamed others, language is indeed a barrier. In other instances, the comparison between Netflix and other television studios is explicit. For example, when discussing the company's relationship with local producers, Larry Tanz, VP of content for Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, says:

> It's a different approach to making content than in the U.S. We really partner with producers on a creative level and we're not making all of these shows ourselves. We are actually making them with great local producers. It's a much different relationship from the traditional Hollywood studio model where you sort of do everything yourself. Here, it's quite the opposite. We're entirely working with local producers, so we rely on them for the execution but also for help in sourcing and developing great creative ideas. (Lodderhose, 2021)

In this formulation, Netflix is not merely different from a traditional Hollywood studio, but is in fact the "opposite."

Other executives offer slightly different variations of the same theme. Bajaria frames Netflix production practices as a reversal of traditional global content flows. She says:

> We have local offices in 26 countries, and the programming team in each are people who are from that country, speak the language, understand the culture and the sensitivities….We want the world to know their stories. It's Hollywood that has been exporting stories to the world all these years. Now we want the local creative communities to export their stories. (Kalra, 2022)

Yet, even as Netflix executives claim that the streaming service inverts the power imbalances that have historically characterized global television, nothing specific is mentioned about the local producers or the local cultures other than that they are located outside of Hollywood. This shares significant parallels with other public relations efforts like Netflix's Global Top 10 lists which, as Wayne and Ribke (2024) note, create a series of false equivalencies between the popularity of English-language and non-English-language content (p. 1349). As we argue in the next section, this flattening of national difference performs an important rhetorical function within the discourses of cultural authenticity more broadly.

6. "Make the World a Safer Place"

In his analysis of the broadcast premiere of Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986), Caldwell (2020) argues that the film, whose main character is a photojournalist covering the Salvadoran Civil War, was marketed to television audiences in relation to the American invasion of Panama which began a few weeks earlier in late-1989. Alongside other programming addressing US-Latin American relations broadcast around the same time, he notes that "national distinctions of the sort that separate the countries of Central America seemed, in this case, to have little value to American television programmers" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 169). Caldwell concludes his case study of *Salvador* by arguing that the erasure of national difference is in fact a significant facet of televisuality. He writes, "Countries, nationalities, leaders, political affiliation—all are apparently interchangeable when it comes to the worldly spectacle 'out there.' By neutering particularity and partisanship, televisuality makes the global spectacle open to infinite appropriation" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 196). In this section, we argue that a similar dynamic characterizes Netflix's discourses of cultural authenticity. But in this context, executives' claims regarding universal storytelling render cultural differences meaningless, which, in turn, allows the company to frame this neutered form of cultural authenticity as a stimulant promoting global empathy and understanding.

Given the centrality of authenticity to Netflix's industrial discourses regarding its global commissions, it is somewhat counterintuitive that the stories produced in the context of local cultures are also universal. Yet, the connection between these concepts is often made explicit. According to Netflix's other co-CEO Greg Peters, "We believe that people have always wanted authentic storytelling that is rooted in local culture and that locality actually illuminates the universal themes of the story" (Jha, 2019). The precise mechanism by which different local cultures illuminate unspecified universal themes remains unclear. Nonetheless, executives continue to reference the importance of culturally authentic and simultaneously universal storytelling. For example, in a blog post touting a five-million-dollar commitment to support women storytellers, Bajaria (2021) writes, "Experience has taught me that great stories are universal: They can come from anywhere, be created by anyone, and be loved by everyone—what matters is that they are told authentically." It is here, in the phrase "come from anywhere," that universality strips cultural difference from cultural authenticity. As a letter to shareholders explains, "Another goal is to create great, locally authentic stories in countries all around the world" (Netflix, 2021a). The letter goes on to claim that the popularity of culturally authentic globally commissioned series "supports our thesis that great stories are

universal: They can come from anywhere and be loved everywhere." In this universe of Netflix's industrial discourse, the specific local culture that underpins the cultural authenticity of any series is irrelevant—it can literally come from anywhere. The national differences between local producers are rhetorically flattened as, to paraphrase Caldwell (2020, p. 169), all cultural authenticities appear as one and the same phenomenon in Netflix's multi-textual streaming soup.

At the same time, any national differences between viewers, be they political or social, are discursively replaced with a global and undifferentiated construction of the Netflix audience (Wayne & Uribe Sandoval, 2021, p. 93). On this blank canvas of its imagined audience, Netflix projects an image of its globally commissioned content as a vehicle for empathy and global understanding. For example, a press release announcing a new slate of "best-in-class" Korean series asserts:

> It's amazing to see how these Korea films and TV resonate with audiences around the world—from Korea to South East Asia and the Americas. By making it easy for people to watch films and shows from other countries, we can help them build empathy and develop a shared understanding of the world. (Ko & Cho, 2020)

Several months after this announcement, nearly identical language appears in a *Hollywood Reporter* story regarding plans for "best-in-class" Nigerian content. According to Ben Amadasun, Netflix's director of licensing and co-productions in Africa:

> It's amazing to see how Nigerian films and series resonate with audiences around the world. By making it easy for people to watch films and shows from other countries, we can help them build empathy and develop a shared understanding of the world. (Szalai, 2020)

Yet, this is not merely an instance of boilerplate language that includes dubious claims regarding the supposed impact of Netflix content on subscribers.

Although the discursive relationship between locally authentic content and global understanding has only emerged in the last few years, the broader claim that Netflix itself is a force for global good dates back to the service's 2016 global expansion. At a press event in Paris early that year, for example, Netflix founder Reed Hastings told the audience that "by building a globally available service, sharing content from all parts of the world…we can do our part of increasing global understanding towards a goal of greater peace and empathy" (Bryan, 2016). More recently, executives have been explicit that culturally authentic content generates empathy and increases global understanding. According to Bajaria:

> TV creates connections when you are true and authentic to the vision of the creator; the more specific it is, the more universal it feels. Cultural diplomacy happens naturally through authentic storytelling—you build empathy, more understanding and more affinity for another culture while being transported into their story. (Haley, 2021)

Sarandos goes even further. When asked by an interviewer if streaming has been "good for culture," he replies:

> I think it's been great for culture. Not only great for culture; in a strange way, I think it's been great to make the world a safer place. I think you're exposed to cultures around the world in a way that makes you more understanding and empathetic. (García-Navarro, 2024)

Such statements, of course, oversimplify the intricate relationship between audiovisual production and consumption, and the development of empathy and understanding across cultures. Furthermore, these claims suggest an oversimplified understanding of what culture is and the role that media plays in its representation. Yet, the emphasis on culture and authenticity in Netflix's discourse suggests that these values have become an integral part of how Netflix wants its content and brand to be perceived—as socially valuable and committed. Despite its superficiality, the discourses analyzed suggest that cultural authenticity is not merely an addition but an integral part of Netflix's content strategy.

7. Conclusion

This analysis uses a media industry studies approach (Herbert et al., 2020) in conjunction with Caldwell's (2020) concept of televisuality to explore the significance of cultural authenticity within Netflix's industrial discourse. We find that cultural authenticity performs some similar discursive functions for Netflix that televisuality did for executives in the multichannel transition. Netflix's executives use cultural authenticity to describe the overall logic of their global content commissioning strategy which is all the more significant given the streaming service's lack of a traditional, content-based television brand. In addition, the discursive emphasis on cultural authenticity allows executives to differentiate the company from other Hollywood studios and claim that their content inverts the hierarchical power dynamics that have traditionally characterized the relationships between American producers and global audiences. Furthermore, the discourses of cultural authenticity appear to celebrate cultural differences even as they strip such differences of meaning. This, in turn, renders all cultures, whatever their differences, similarly suitable for consumption by Netflix's global and undifferentiated audience.

Yet, the degree to which it is useful for scholars to conceptualize cultural authenticity as a totalizing concept akin to televisuality in the context of streaming remains unclear for two reasons. First, the above analysis is limited by the exclusive consideration of Netflix. As Lotz (2021) notes, among multinational SVOD services, Netflix employs an industrial strategy that is distinctive, leading her to characterize the service as a "zebra among horses" (p. 196). Unlike its competitors including Amazon and Disney, Netflix's primary revenue stream remains limited to providing video content to its subscribers despite recent efforts to introduce an advertising tier (Spangler, 2022). It also remains unclear if other multinational SVODs similarly position cultural authenticity as central to their global commissioning strategy.

Second, as varied and sprawling as television's landscape was during the multichannel transition, television's contemporary landscape is both larger and more complex. Although television remains national in several important ways, it is no longer possible for scholars to conceptualize television in exclusively national terms. As a result, a number of common categories that structure Caldwell's analysis, like audience demographics for example, need significant reconceptualization to become useful across national contexts. In addition, the technological and industrial links that once connected the various segments of American television from local public-access stations to national networks have weakened, many to the point of irrelevance.

Given these circumstances, it remains unclear if a single conceptual framework could do now what televisuality once productively did.

In spite of these concerns, this analysis nonetheless succeeds in demonstrating that Netflix's executives use cultural authenticity as an industrial activity and brand strategy, positioning it as a means to integrate their content within a broader "mission" of fostering empathy and promoting global understanding. In Netflix's industrial discourses, cultural authenticity is a mantra whose invocation attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable by asserting that the value of cultural difference is only realized when it loses its specificity. Moving forward, it appears that directly addressing cultural authenticity would be useful for scholars interrogating Netflix's reliance on diversity in the context of the company's strategic and marketing efforts. It would also be useful to explore these issues within the industrial discourses of other global SVOD platforms in what might be a productive first step in a broader comparative study. Furthermore, the insights generated in this article could inform fieldwork-based studies of writers, producers, and other industry professionals developing content for Netflix.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Michael L. Wayne is an assistant professor of media and creative industries in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam. His research addressing contemporary television industries has appeared in *Television & New Media*, *Media, Culture & Society*, *Critical Studies in Television*, and *Convergence*.

Deborah Castro is an assistant professor at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen. Her main research interests lie in the field of television studies. She was awarded a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship (European Commission) to investigate film tourism initiatives in Spain from the local communities' perspectives. She is vice-chair of the Television Studies Section at the European Communication Research and Education Association, and chair of the Erasmus Knowledge Centre for Film, Heritage, and Tourism.

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Televisuality on a Global Scale: Netflix's Local-Language Strategy

Frédérique Khazoom [1,2]

[1] Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands
[2] Department of Art History, Film, and Audiovisual Media, Université de Montréal, Canada

Correspondence: Frédérique Khazoom (f.khazoom@uva.nl)

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Abstract

This article focuses on Netflix's local-language strategy, the context leading up to it, and the extent to which transnationality, in this particular case, becomes televisual in John Caldwell's sense. I argue that Netflix has developed a different business model for transnational TV formats through this strategy. For that, I use the Netflix original and exclusive series *Criminal* (Field Smith & Kay, 2019–present-a–d) as a case study and show that its production context triggers a specific visual response due to Netflix's economic and legal obligations in Europe. Building on the "transnational TV format trading system" approach of Jean K. Chalaby, this case study highlights how the affordances of multi-country video-on-demand providers like Netflix allow for the successful international franchising strategy in linear television to be conducted internally and simultaneously. Specifically, it shows that fictional TV series no longer need to be developed for a national broadcaster before reaching international markets because multi-country video-on-demand providers do not require various national intermediaries to distribute and stream TV series in different markets. The adaptation process can also be bypassed entirely if the decision to localize a programme into multiple versions is made before production starts. As a result, companies like Netflix can produce several local variations of TV content without running into as many barriers as national broadcasters. From there, I further argue using Mareike Jenner's "grammar of transnationalism" that the impact of production and distribution processes on the visual treatment of *Criminal* leads to style excess at the interface level and stylistic scarcity at the aesthetic level.

Keywords

aesthetics; media globalization; Netflix; televisuality; transnational television; TV formats; TV production

1. Introduction

The transformations of Netflix over the years—from American DVD distributor by mail to global media behemoth offering a variety of audiovisual works on its video-on-demand (VOD) service—and the numerous changes the company brought upon cultural industries in the US and abroad are well documented in and outside academia. It has been established since 2007 that its usage of internet infrastructure and streaming technology to offer its VOD service across the world changed the distribution of audiovisual content and its consumption by viewers in many ways (see Chalaby, 2023; Jenner, 2018; Lotz, 2017; McDonald & Smith-Rowsey, 2016). Typical examples include the popularization of "binge-watching" as a common television viewing practice, same-day global release on Netflix's interface for its original and exclusive programmes, on-demand access to a content catalogue for a monthly subscription, and the introduction of personalized recommendations based on machine-learning algorithms.

Whilst Netflix's use of internet infrastructure and streaming technology has been discussed in seminal works on platform and transnational television studies regarding the development of a new business model, algorithmic culture, television consumption and so on (e.g., Lobato, 2019; Lotz, 2017), few have addressed its consequences on processes of production–distribution and format adaptation as well as the power exercised by Netflix over these processes on several levels ranging from local to global. Yet, this is especially important in the context of transnational television considering that the company produces and releases programmes across the globe. The implication here is that the way Netflix operates aggravates existing asymmetrical power dynamics in television industries in and outside the US. In turn, this affects other dimensions of the company, such as the form and aesthetic of its original and exclusive content. This article will thus make the case for the development of Netflix's dominant position within transnational television from a production standpoint through a specific content strategy. Then, it will address its consequences on a cultural level through the aesthetic analysis of one of its exclusive and original programmes.

First, I will argue that Netflix developed a business model for transnational TV formats through a content strategy called "local-language" to serve its globally oriented interests and its position in transnational television industries. For that, I will use Chalaby's concept of "transnational TV format trading system" (Chalaby, 2015, p. 462) to demonstrate that Netflix managed to surpass dominant players in the transnational television industry by gaining more control over the "global TV format commodity chain" via a specific "input-output structure" (Chalaby, 2015, p. 461). To illustrate that concretely, I will use *Criminal* (Field Smith & Kay, 2019–present-a–d) as a case study. Described by Netflix as "a police procedural with a unique premise" (Netflix, 2018), the original and exclusive programme takes place entirely within the confines of a police interview suite and comprises 12 stories set in four countries: the UK, France, Germany, and Spain. Each country initially bears three episodes in one of their official languages, with no narrative link between them—i.e., you do not need to watch the UK episodes first to watch the French episodes and so on. A year later, Netflix released four more episodes of the UK variation only. However, this article will only focus on *Criminal*'s initial pre-production and release in 2019.

What makes this case relevant is its exemplification of how Netflix can scale the process between production and distribution to an ambiguous transnational level. Namely, despite their varied settings, all variations of *Criminal* were co-produced by a single production company from the UK called Idiotlamp Productions. The company's two founders—George Kay and Jim Field Smith—also served as showrunners for

the entirety of the programme. Interestingly, every episode was shot back-to-back on the same, identical set in Netflix's production hub in Spain (Pickard, 2019) and most of the Spanish staff and crew members worked on more than one national set of episodes if not all of them. Exceptions to this were episode-based positions—e.g., assistant nurse—or the following key roles, which were filled by people from the episodes' country of origin: writers, directors, co-executive producers, actors, casting directors, and chief editors. In short, *Criminal* is an English coproduction commissioned by an American company for global release, filmed in Spain with a majority Spanish crew, but with key creative roles filled by local talents from France, England, Spain, and Germany, in local languages. Differently put, *Criminal*'s transnational ambiguity comes from maintaining local linguistic and creative distinctions while being presented as a visually unified production. Therefore, the aim of sections 2–5 is to contextualize how Netflix was able to produce this type of TV format through the business model of its local-language strategy in conjunction with its usage of internet infrastructure and streaming technology.

Second, I will argue that Netflix's local-language strategy impacts the visual treatment of its original and exclusive programmes as well as their presentation on Netflix's interface. Specifically, I will assert that Netflix's business model for transnational TV formats fuels a presentational crisis that encourages some programmes under the local-language strategy to appear on the interface as clearly defined local content while remaining culturally ambiguous visually. Still using *Criminal* as a case study, I will show that the programme's (pre-)production segment under the local-language strategy triggers a specific visual response leading to style excess at the interface level and style scarcity at the aesthetic level. At the interface level, I will focus on how transnationality becomes televisual in John Caldwell's sense due to the wide array of options offered by Netflix to find the programme on its interface. As for *Criminal*'s visual treatment, I will use Jenner's (2018) "grammar of transnationalism" to analyze how the programme remains culturally ambiguous and why that is important to Netflix's business model for transnational TV formats for its local-language strategy to work efficiently.

2. The Circulation of TV Formats

This section will use Chalaby's (2015, p. 462) "transnational TV format trading system" to explain why a change in the TV format business model is needed to account for the possibility of a company like Netflix to produce a format transnationally and to circulate it internationally. Indeed, a case like *Criminal* might seem somehow normal nowadays, but it was not possible only a few years ago. This is because TV formats are usually produced and licensed for adaptation on a one-to-one basis in terms of product and market—i.e., a TV format is usually made and adapted for broadcast on a regional or national basis, at least initially. This main model of TV format licensing stems from the gradual globalization of television structures brought upon by waves of television deregulation across the globe originating from the US in the second half of the 1980s and the subsequent proliferation of national and transnational channels at the end of the 1990s. According to Chalaby, these events are what caused "the number of formats in circulation [to grow] exponentially, as did the number of countries they travelled to, and the number of companies distributing and producing them" (Chalaby, 2015, p. 461). In other words, the globalization of television led to the systemization of the TV format business model. For this reason, Chalaby refers to it as a "trading system" instead. He defines it as follows:

> A trading system can be defined as a *singular transnational space that brings together interdependent economic agents, institutions, places, networks and commodities*. At its core lies a *commodity chain* that

> determines economic agents' positions and strategies, organizes networks of production and distribution and shapes trade flows within that space. (Chalaby, 2015, p. 461)

In short, the commodity chain acts as the (re)organizing structure of the system. Here, the TV format licensing model uses a specific "input-output structure" (Chalaby, 2015, p. 462) of the commodity chain—i.e., the link connecting production and distribution processes. Generally, the input-output structure can include various economic agents such as format owners, distribution companies, production companies, and broadcasters. Furthermore, the number of steps and economic agents change depending on the chosen model. In the case of the TV format licensing model, the structure can be deployed in two ways. Both include the sale of a TV format's international rights (license) by a format owner (A) to a distribution company (B), which then either sells the license to a production company (C) that will produce the format locally for a broadcaster (D) to later acquire, or sells the license directly to a broadcaster (C) that will produce the format in-house and broadcast it (C). Here, the letters are suggested by Chalaby and used to identify the economic agents involved in the four steps of the input-output structure—i.e., origination, distribution, production, and acquisition (Chalaby, 2015, p. 463).

This structure of the TV format licensing model can also be replicated to multiple markets if a licence is sold to foreign production companies or broadcasters, for instance. Chalaby theorized the replication of the structure to other markets for format adaptation as the "local-global-local route" (Chalaby, 2012, p. 31), which can be summarized as the process of identifying the global potential in a local TV format and then localizing it for a different territory through the process of adaptation. This route also extends to later variations of the TV format licensing model that account for different power distributions within the input-output structure of the commodity chain, such as the "international production model" (Chalaby, 2015, p. 463). Here, the structure can be deployed in different ways depending on the control achieved by an economic agent in the structure of the chain. For example, format owners who acquire production facilities and produce their own content locally and internationally (A) become more present in the input-output structure of the chain: origination (A) → distribution (A) → production (A) → acquisition (B) (Chalaby, 2015, p. 464). Another example is when broadcasters and media conglomerates consolidate into "super-groups" in the hope of achieving complete vertical integration of the commodity chain through an A/A/A/A input-output structure—e.g., by acquiring production companies and facilities, gaining majority stakes in production houses, or signing joint venture agreements with local companies across various territories (Chalaby, 2012, pp. 24–25). However, it is important to note that this latter form of the "international production model" is mostly an exception; only a few broadcasters and media conglomerates managed to extend their reach to other markets and when they did, the extent of their reach was limited to "the few countries where they own a TV channel" (Chalaby, 2015, pp. 463–464). What the "international production model" reveals then is that scaling the vertical integration of the "global TV format commodity chain" beyond the home market is difficult due to the last step of the input-output structure, which requires the acquisition of a TV channel in every market an economic agent wishes to expand in. Consequently, "super-groups" can only extend their reach to other markets by replicating the one-to-one connection of the "local-global-local route" between a programme and a market across every territory. This is why TV format licensing for adaptation implies a process that first benefits from a format's success and "know-how" in an original market.

One question, then, is what happens to the "local-global-local route" and the input-output structure of the "global TV format commodity chain" when a VOD service like Netflix uses internet infrastructure and streaming

technology instead of cable or broadcast systems to extend its stay beyond a national level by circulating audiovisual content across the globe. To provide some answers, I will now look into the connection between Netflix's business model for transnational TV formats and its use of internet infrastructure and streaming technology to analyze how it allows the company to achieve vertical integration of the input-output structure and efficiently scale it beyond a national level.

3. Transnational TV Formats (Netflix's Version)

First, it is important to note that Netflix also adapts some of its own original and exclusive programmes through the local-language strategy. This is mostly done with its unscripted formats, such as *Love Is Blind* (Claesson et al., 2024–present [Sweden]; Cagliolo, Helman, & Solmesky, 2024–present [Mexico]; Cagliolo, Quiroga, et al., 2024–present [Argentina]; Coelen et al., 2020–present [US]; Ghosn, 2024–present [Habibi]; Goto, 2022 [Japan]; Karim et al., 2024–present [UK]; Paes, 2021–present [Brazil]). Netflix's only scripted format adaptations to date are *La Casa de Papel* (Pina et al., 2017–2021) from Spain, which spun off a Korean adaptation called *Money Heist: Korea—Joint Economic Area* (Pina, 2022–present), and *Elite* (Montero et al., 2018–2024), also from Spain, which spun off an Indian adaptation called *Class* (Ahluwalia, 2023–present). Yet, the company's adaptation process differs from Chalaby's "local-global-local route" because it is done with the intention and goal of reaching "global viewing"—i.e., attracting viewers on a global scale at once (Netflix, 2016). In other words, a format adaptation under the local-language strategy is not made to only target its home market through a one-to-one connection since Netflix's VOD service is available across the world. Consequently, Netflix needs to value the economic benefits of a multinational or global success more than success on a national scale only. Let us see how that is in more detail.

Netflix started pursuing global expansion strategies in 2016 as revenues from international markets were steadily paced to outgrow US revenues and did so in 2017 (Insider Intelligence, 2016; Netflix Investors, 2017, pp. 1–2). One of the main strategies was to streamline the entire content operations under one global TV unit and a single programming strategy called "local-language" (Low, 2020). Specifically, the local-language strategy entails the production or adaptation of original and exclusive programmes in and outside the US, in English and non-English languages, in the hope of achieving "global viewing." To help pursue this strategy on a global scale, Netflix uses a business model called the "cost-plus model," which covers all production costs of a TV programme upfront in addition to giving a 20% to 30% profit fee in exchange for owning "all or most of the rights to distribute the show, domestically and internationally" (Adalian & Fernandez, 2016) as well as "most merchandising rights" (Castillo, 2018) in perpetuity or "at least a period of 10 to 15 years" (Lotz, 2021, p. 201). In other words, the local-language strategy acts as a tool for Netflix to expand its operations globally by setting terms and conditions that allow it to retain as much power and control as possible over its intellectual property internationally.

The main cause behind Netflix's need for multinational or global success comes from its need to secure large investments from its shareholders. Indeed, the company tends to invest heavier sums of money into its original and exclusive productions than most of its competitors (Ryan & Littleton, 2017). However, large production budgets come with strings attached as the company needs to prove to its shareholders that they can lead to economic profitability and a return on investment. For that, Netflix uses metrics to measure the efficiency of its original and exclusive content across every market. Examples include the cost of a programme per viewing hour (Netflix Investors, 2012, p. 8), the number of views per title in its first 91 days

on Netflix (Netflix Investors, 2023, p. 4), the number of new subscriptions generated by the release of a programme, audience retention (Urban et al., 2016), and the number of "households that watch 90% of a film or season of a series" ("completers"; Netflix, 2019). Differently put, Netflix needs its original and exclusive content to reach a certain degree of multinational success to continue investing large sums into its local-language strategy and growing its business. Therefore, the decision-making process of Netflix in terms of greenlighting, producing, and adapting original and exclusive programmes—or even buying international licensing rights—under the local-language strategy is always informed by the company's needs for content to reach economic profitability through a multinational or global success under the "cost-plus model."

What this means regarding the connection between a programme and a market for Netflix is that it is not one-to-one, but always many-to-many—i.e., a programme is intended for many audiences around the world from the start and it is available on Netflix's interface across every market on the same day. Consequently, the input-output structure of a programme under this strategy and the route for content adaptation necessarily differ; other structures and routes are thus needed to account for the need for success beyond the home market. To make this claim more concrete, I will first show how the many-to-many connection of Netflix's local-language original and exclusive programmes reveals that concrete processes can be implemented in their input-output structure to maximize revenues and the potential for "global viewing." As previously stated, I will be using *Criminal* as a case study.

4. *Criminal*'s Input-Output Structure

To understand the effects of Netflix's many-to-many connection between a programme and a market on the input-output structure of its local-language original and exclusive programmes, I adapted Chalaby's TV format business model to Netflix's local-language strategy and *Criminal* specifically.

To quickly preface this, it is important to mention that Netflix first achieved vertical integration through an A/A/A/A structure after it started fully producing its own original and exclusive programmes back in 2013. From this point on, the company became the sole or main economic agent in each step of the input-output structure. More precisely, the acquisition of a format's rights allowed Netflix to skip the distribution step and directly produce or co-produce a format in-house with a local production company before releasing it on its own online interface. In this sense, the input-output structure of the chain seems relatively equivalent to the structure of the "super-groups" under the "international production model." What differs, however, is the scalability of the first and last steps of the structure beyond a local or national level and its consequences on the production step. Indeed, the correlation between the upfront acquisition of a format's global rights through the "cost-plus model" and the company's need to achieve multinational or worldwide success by releasing programmes globally using internet infrastructure and streaming technology means that the first and last step of the input-output structure operate on a global scale (x). This leads to the structure Ax/A/A/Ax, in which both a format's origination and its release are done with the objective of reaching "global viewing."

This change in the input-output structure is notable because it impacts the production step of the structure drastically. Indeed, because Netflix acquires a format's global rights upfront and is free to release it at its convenience across the world, it is also at liberty and incentivized to produce adaptations or variations of said format in different markets in the timeline and manner of its choosing. In the case of *Criminal*, four national variations were co-produced by Netflix and Idiotlamp Productions. I use the term variation here because as

I mentioned in Section 1, all of *Criminal* was shot in the same period, at the same place, and by approximately the same team. Differently put, no adaptation process took place as the format was developed with these four variations in mind (Pickard, 2019); none of them stemmed from the prior success and "know-how" of another in a former market. Consequently, the many-to-many connection between a programme and a market means that the production step can be scaled to a multinational level (y), if desired, without undergoing an adaptation process. In the case of *Criminal*, this leads the input-output structure of Ax/A/Ay/Ax (see Figure 1).

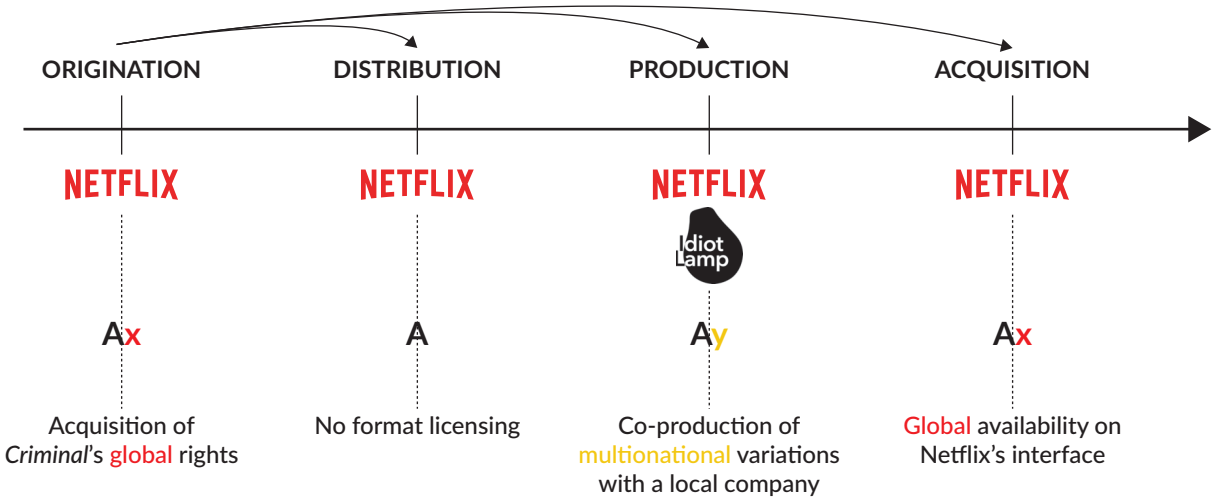

Figure 1. *Criminal*'s input-output structure.

Therefore, the possibility for Netflix to scale the first and last step of the input-output structure of its local-language original and exclusive programmes marks a fundamental change in the ways that television is made as it allows for the adaptation process to be bypassed entirely in favour of multinational variations production.

Moreover, because the production step can be scaled to produce a variety of national formats in-house, this change in the input-output structure of the "global TV format commodity chain" has consequences on the route leading to format adaptations. Indeed, the production of format variations means that Chalaby's route for format adaptation—the "local-global-local route"—does not apply to cases like *Criminal*. Specifically, the replication of the input-output structure to different markets is not needed to produce and release multinational versions of a format since Netflix can produce them in-house and release them globally through its online interface. Furthermore, Netflix's control and power over an input-output structure such as *Criminal*'s means that the number of cultural intermediaries in the entire process has been greatly reduced. As mentioned, only one company is handling the production of *Criminal*'s four national variations whereas four local companies would have been involved in the "local-global-local route" due to the route's one-to-one connection between a programme and a market. Therefore, I contend that Netflix's use of a different input-output structure through its many-to-many connection not only problematizes the production context of its local-language original and exclusive content but also the status of the image on a cultural level. To demonstrate how that is, I will show that a different route exists for formats like *Criminal* that feature processes of national variations instead of adaptations. Then, I will explain the impact of the local-language strategy on the image of *Criminal* through its representation on the interface and through the aesthetic of the programme itself.

5. *Criminal*'s Route for TV Format Variations

In cases like *Criminal*, where Netflix (co)produces multiple variations of the same format in-house around the same time, I claim that the company is using a different route than the one presented by Chalaby for format adaptation. I refer to it for the time being as a "global-locals-global route." Based on the local-language strategy, its associated business model and Netflix's usage of internet infrastructure and streaming technology to make original and exclusive programmes appealing and accessible to global audiences through its many-to-many connection, this route implies that Netflix can: algorithmically assess the global potential of a format in terms of audience reach and market penetration; acquire a format's global rights; (co)produce multiple variations of a format within the same timeframe, and make them globally accessible at once (see Figure 2).

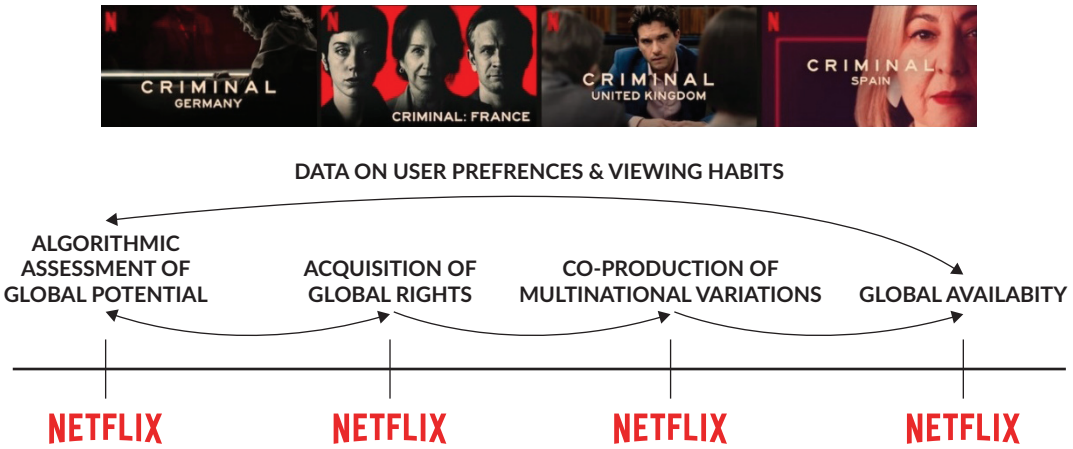

Figure 2. *Criminal*'s use of the "global-locals-global route."

Indeed, Netflix's reliance on internet infrastructure and streaming technology allows the company to acquire an enormous and precise data set regarding the preferences and viewing habits of its members on its interface (see Adalian, 2018; Dye et al., 2020). For instance, Netflix can know whether a member watched a series in full or not, how long it took to complete it, or at which episode they stopped watching. When cross-referencing data points, Netflix can then estimate whether a title is or could be successful across multiple markets or not, whether some genres perform better than others, etc. The conclusions that the company draws from connecting these data points can then inform whether to (re)invest in the production of a series or not, which is helpful for Netflix from an economic standpoint. From a cultural standpoint, however, these economic conclusions can also influence what kind of "local" content Netflix should make, what form it should take, and how it should look. For example, Netflix can choose to mainly license content or produce original and exclusive titles in markets that are economically advantageous to it—i.e., markets that have infrastructure in place to make audiovisual content, offer tax breaks and other financial benefits, have not reached saturation, have content with a good track record in terms of multinational or global appeal and success, etc.—such as South Korea (Wan, 2023). Simultaneously, however, this means that markets that are economically detrimental to Netflix, like Denmark, can be discarded or disadvantaged in terms of cultural representation and financial investment even though Netflix operates in and financially benefits from them (see Whittock, 2023).

Netflix's high level of economic and cultural power stems from an asymmetry between its scope of operations and the scope of regulations aimed at VOD service providers. Indeed, whereas services like

Netflix operate at near-global capacity, the scope of regulations aimed at them is limited to a national or supranational level and varies between countries. While some countries may place or apply policies to regulate these companies for a variety of reasons—e.g., levelling the playing field between VOD service providers and traditional broadcasters, acting out of concern for the safety of minors, etc.—others may choose to do so to a lesser degree or not at all in order to attract these companies and benefit from large investments in audiovisual industries. For instance, the EU modified its existing audiovisual policies in 2018 to include "multi-country VOD providers" like Netflix (Council of the European Union, 2020, pp. 10–16). Principally, the EU added a 30% quota of European works and the possibility for member states to tax these companies if they target audiences within their jurisdiction, notwithstanding where their headquarters are located. The main idea was for these global players to participate actively in the production and circulation of European works by either producing original European content, licensing it on their interface, and/or financially participating in national audiovisual funds. However, because the tax is optional and the content quota does not specify that all member states need to be included, companies like Netflix are in a strategic position to make crucial cultural decisions as they can pick and choose how and where to fulfil the content quota. Specifically, they can favour member states that align with their commercial imperatives.

Keeping that in mind, we might start looking at Netflix's decision to produce *Criminal*'s four national variations in only one member state differently. Namely, the choice of Spain as a European production hub is not as random as it might first look. Indeed, the country offers tax incentives to national and international productions, which makes it an attractive destination in Europe (see Green, 2019). Spain is also a strategic location because the country depends on the economic support of "global streamers"—Netflix specifically—to sustain its audiovisual industries (see Green, 2019; Rey, 2020). For this reason, Spain's financial obligations to domestic and targeting VOD service providers are flexible. More precisely, all VOD service providers are at liberty to choose between direct investments (original production or licensing) and/or levies. Thus, Netflix is free to choose how to invest in the country. In other words, Spain's mandatory financial obligations align with Netflix's commercial interests. Furthermore, producing several variations of a TV format is a strategic way for Netflix to adhere to current and emergent regulations and content quotas. With *Criminal*, the co-production of one multinational programme resulted in the release of four series as they all appear as separate titles divided by country on Netflix's interface—i.e., *Criminal: United Kingdom*, *Criminal: France*, *Criminal: Spain*, and *Criminal: Germany*. The only way to reunite all variations is to look for them under the title "*Criminal* collection" on the search bar (see Figure 3), or to select one variation and scroll down to find the others under "*Criminal* collection."

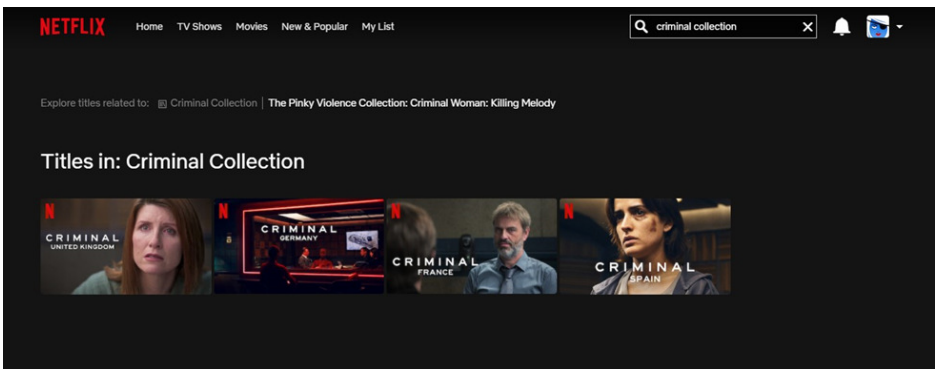

Figure 3. Screenshot of "*Criminal* collection" keyword search results on the author's Netflix profile on July 21, 2021.

Differently put, Netflix released *Criminal* as four programmes even though it was produced as one. The company does not provide any official reason for this decision. However, dividing *Criminal* into four titles after production fulfils the quota of European works more productively. Additionally, offering each national variation separately or partially combined through Netflix's numerous recommendation categories allows the company to target and reach a broader viewer pool and thus increase its chances of achieving "global viewing."

To summarize, Netflix's efforts in developing global expansion strategies since 2016 like the local-language strategy led to significant changes in the processes linking a programme's production and its release. Its use of internet infrastructure and streaming technology allowed it to scale multiple steps of the input-output structure beyond a local or national level and ascertain its control and power over the "global TV format commodity chain" at the same time. The result is the possibility for a single company to (co)produce and release as many national variations or adaptations of a TV format as it wishes with limited intervention from national cultural instances. Now that we understand the impact of the local-language strategy on a production level, let us see how this strategy can affect the image of its programmes by looking at *Criminal* at the interface and aesthetic level through the lens of Caldwell's (1995) concept of televisuality and Jenner's (2018) "grammar of transnationalism."

6. The Impact of the Local-Language Strategy on the Image of *Criminal*

The most striking visual element of *Criminal* is that it uses the same set depicting the same interior and exterior for every episode. Whilst reusing sets across TV shows is a known industry strategy to save costs, the set of *Criminal* is stripped of any visual elements that could suggest where the action is located even though it is supposed to take place in four different countries. Moreover, each variation follows the same narrative structure and was filmed according to a similar spatial "grammar" (Kerjean, 2019; Pickard, 2019). In other words, every variation of *Criminal* looks the same (see Figure 4 for an example).

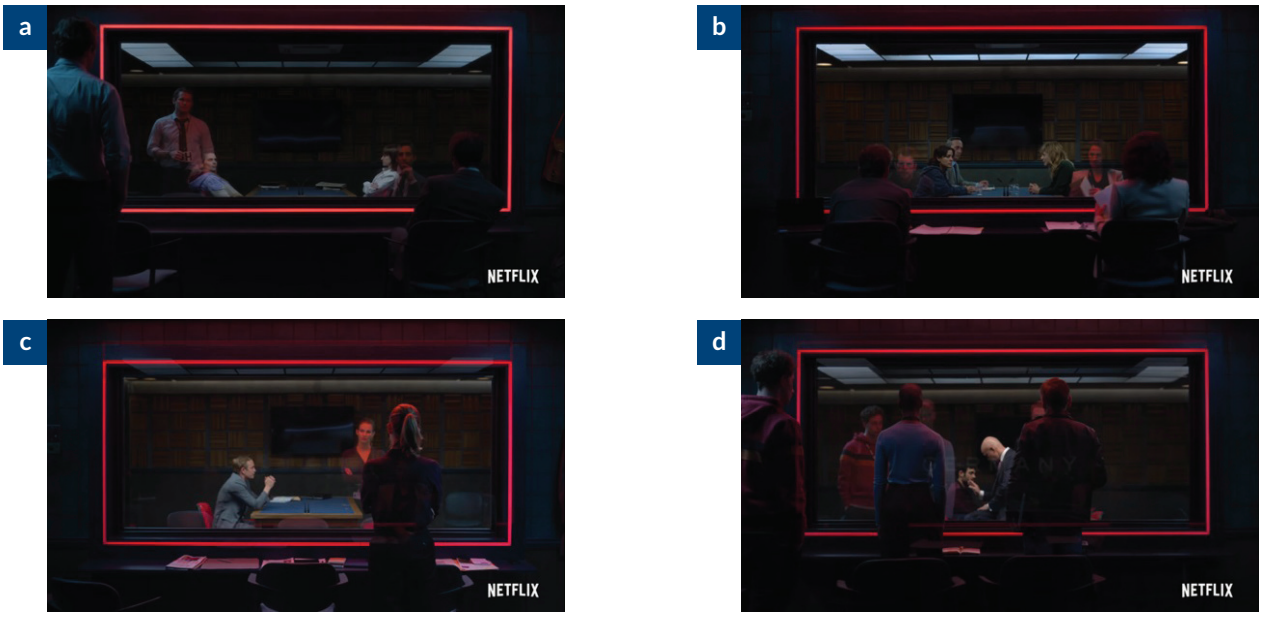

Figure 4. Screenshot of *Criminal: United Kingdom* (a), *Criminal: Spain* (b), *Criminal: France* (c), and *Criminal: Germany* (d).

At first sight, Netflix's television style seems contradictory to Caldwell's (1995) concept of televisuality—i.e., that contemporary television programmes have a distinctive televisual aesthetic represented by stylistic excess (or style as a performance)—since there are no identifiable style markers to differentiate each variation and no distinct look. The question then is whether the changes brought upon by Netflix's local-language strategy on processes of production–distribution and format adaptation are affecting the style of its content and, to a larger degree, the way contemporary television programmes made by "multi-country VOD service providers" look. My hypothesis is that VOD service providers using a many-to-many connection need to perform style, but in a way that is consumer-friendly beyond a specific location. With Netflix, style needs to help its programmes cross borders to maximize the potential for "global viewing." In other words, Netflix's televisual style must be transnationally appealing. In the case of *Criminal*, I argue that televisuality takes place at the interface level instead of the aesthetic level of a programme.

At the interface level, Netflix is continuously performing style to cross borders by making TV formats like *Criminal* appear to audiences transnationally. As I previously mentioned, the four variations of *Criminal* can appear together—as a collection or not—but only for audiences that actively search for it. They can also appear separately in many changing personalized recommendation categories that are based on variables like location and genre for discovery purposes according to a user's viewing habits and preferences (see Figure 5).

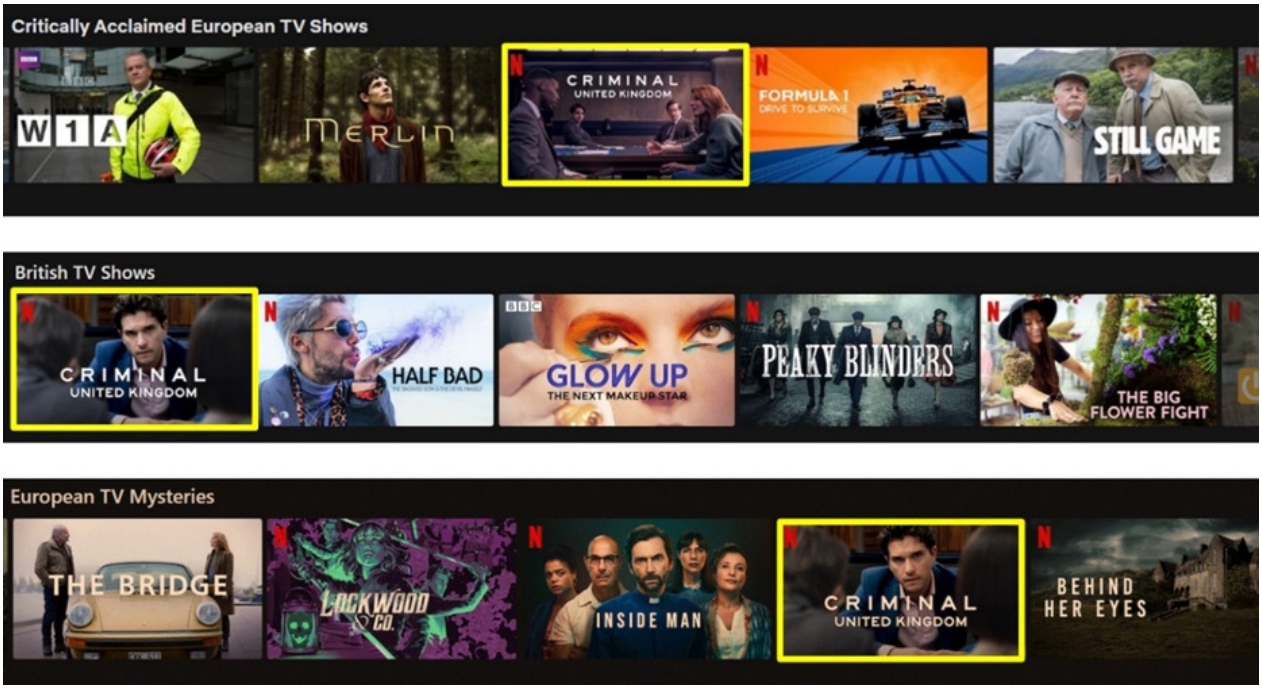

Figure 5. Screenshot of *Criminal: United Kingdom* in different recommendation categories from the author's Netflix profile on June 1, 2021.

The artwork of every title on Netflix's interface is also determined in this way and changes in time, as the company uses the same data to generate what it calls "personalized visuals" (Chandrashekar et al., 2017; see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Examples of "personalized visuals." Source: Adapted from Chandrashekar et al. (2017).

The continual articulation of programmes like *Criminal* on every member's Netflix profile is due to perpetual testing and updates made by Netflix to optimize personalization features and the potential for "global viewing" (see Chandrashekar et al., 2017; Krishnan, 2016; Nelson, 2016; Urban et al., 2016). Differently put, each variation of *Criminal* is more or less nationally articulated on Netflix's interface depending on targeted elements that will push a viewer to watch the series in a given session. Therefore, Netflix constantly reinvents formats like *Criminal* on a presentational level by performing style on its interface transnationally and to an excess, which helps its content cross borders and reach as many viewers as possible.

At the aesthetic level, Netflix also performs style transnationally, but not necessarily to an excess. In cases like *Criminal*, the company takes the opposite approach, which is to opt for style scarcity as depicted by the programme's use of the same set for each national variation. Regarding how this approach can also be a way to transnationally perform style, Jenner came up with a theory specifically for Netflix's original and exclusive productions that can help explain that. She calls this theory the "grammar of transnationalism" and she defines it as "specific textual features that make texts viable in a reciprocal relationship across borders'' (Jenner, 2018, p. 220). Specifically, Jenner (2018, p. 220) contends that "the importance of exports for the economy of television means that the transnational appeal needs to be coded into the text" from the outset, and that this happens through these textual features. In other words, Netflix's many-to-many connection encourages the proliferation of specific visual and narrative elements in its original and exclusive content. Jenner notes five elements that form Netflix's "grammar of transnationalism" itself (Jenner, 2018, pp. 227–231):

1. Genres associated with the notion of "quality TV" or serious subject matters;
2. A decentralized and postmodern version of history;
3. Broad visual appeal through aesthetics;
4. Representation of Western liberal values and humanism;
5. Multilingualism in dubbing and subtitles options, and within the content.

To be clear, these elements do not all need to be present within one programme to present a transnational appeal. In the case of *Criminal*, all these textual features are present to different degrees. While I cannot go through all of them in detail in this article, here are some observations on the matter.

The choice to set each version of *Criminal* in the same undisclosed location and to film the programme similarly participate in "strategic efforts to internationalize (or deculturize) narrative content to enhance portability across cultural borders" according to Bielby and Harrington (2008, p. 89). Indeed, *Criminal*'s showrunners deliberately decided to avoid cultural elements that could distinguish each variation from the others, such as the way police stations operate and look in each country. As George Kay explained: "To labour on the differences between them [the four countries] was not something we wanted to do for any dramatic reason. So it all became quite a universal story" (as cited in Pickard, 2019). As Jim Field Smith added: "On a visual level, we wanted to create our own space. We tried not to get too bogged down in what a police station in Germany would look like" (as cited in Pickard, 2019). Specifically, the visual deculturization of *Criminal* participates in performing style transnationally by shifting the focus of the programme solely on its genre. For example, historical events mentioned in *Criminal* like the Bataclan terrorist attack in Paris or the fall of the Berlin Wall are not situated or used to deepen viewers' understanding of sociopolitical issues—you don't need to know about these events or see where they took place to follow the story as a viewer. Instead, they act as plot points or background information in service of the crime genre and function as puzzle pieces to answer the premise posed by each episode—i.e., whether the person brought in for questioning is guilty of the accused crime or not. In other words, the crime genre is more transnationally appealing; therefore, it trumps local specificities on an aesthetic and narrative level.

All of this is not to say that there are no local elements in *Criminal* or that they are never useful for Netflix in its globalization strategies. After all, the programme is shot in multiple local languages and features actors, writers, and directors from each country. Rather, I use this case to demonstrate one of many strategies that Netflix can play in terms of style to cross borders and achieve "global viewing." With *Criminal*, I showed that Netflix can perform style in opposite ways to reach the same objectives. I first established that the company uses style excess at the interface level by releasing the programme as four national variations and displaying them with many "personalized visuals" through several personalized recommendation categories. Then, I explained that Netflix uses style scarcity at the aesthetic level through Jenner's "grammar of transnationalism" to focus on elements that are appealing to audiences across the world.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to investigate the consequences of Netflix's local-language strategy on processes of production–distribution and TV format adaptation and, in turn, on the stylistic treatment of its original and exclusive programmes. I first established that the company was able to gain power and control over

its input-output structure and scale most steps beyond a local or national level through its use of internet infrastructure and streaming technology as well as its "cost-plus" business model. Then, I specified how this led to the introduction of a connection going from many-to-many and a new route for TV format variations. Finally, I analyzed the impact of Netflix's local-language strategy on the status of its content's image by showing that the company performs style in a transnationally appealing way to maximize "global viewing." In the case of *Criminal*, the result was an excess of style at the interface level and stylistic scarcity at the aesthetic level.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Frédérique Khazoom is a joint PhD candidate at Université de Montréal in Canada and the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Her research focuses on the ongoing evolution of the television medium in a transnational context, especially as it pertains to over-the-top media services and Netflix in particular. It explores the intersection of policy, economic, technological, and cultural issues within the dynamics of contemporary media industries.

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ARTICLE

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Oblique Agency: Mapping the Globalised Workflows of Television Dubbing and Their Impact on Practitioners

Simone Knox [1] and Kai Hanno Schwind [2]

[1] Department of Film, Theatre & Television, University of Reading, UK
[2] School of Arts, Design, and Media, Kristiania University of Applied Science, Norway

Correspondence: Kai Hanno Schwind (kaihanno.schwind@kristiania.no)

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Abstract

This article offers a comprehensive analysis of how increasingly globalised infrastructures, marked by industry expansion, consolidation, and the impact of streamers, affect the workflows and practices within local dubbing industries. Informed by extensive, original interviews with managerial and creative dubbing practitioners, and industry fieldwork observations since 2017, the article is located within a post-Bourdieuian framework, exploring what significant change for the field and its habitus has meant for agency. Having identified a persistent lack of engagement with the dubbing of television in existing scholarship across several disciplines, the article considers how dubbing practitioners negotiate a wider industrial push towards more streamlining, standardisation, and more attendance to issues concerning equity, diversity, and inclusion. Here, the article offers the notion of oblique agency, to capture how creative agency is moved away from local creative practitioners, through more managerial oversight, prescriptive guidance and tools, and feedback cultures shaped by corporate agendas. Simultaneously, some agency is left to these practitioners, most acutely felt in the case of dubbing contemporary television (marked by narrative and tonal complexity), due to a lack of investment and recognition of dubbing as inherently creative. The article takes care to explore the complexities of these dynamics, especially a pronounced heterogeneity of views, including simultaneous criticism and enjoyment by creative practitioners, as well as a considerable gap between their perspectives and those of managerial practitioners. In this way, the article seeks to make a much-needed contribution to nuanced engagement with dubbing infrastructures and working practices.

Keywords

audiovisual translation; creative agency; dubbing; streamers; televisuality; production cultures

1. Introduction

This article examines the globalised workflows of television dubbing, focusing on the complex dynamics these developing structures have created for dubbing practitioners. Moving away from limited and often negative references to dubbing in past scholarship, we argue for a deeper, practice-informed understanding of dubbing, especially to be better able to grasp how it intersects with televisuality. Through fieldwork observations and original interviews, we map recent industry shifts towards expansion and consolidation, marked by the rising dominance of streamers, and how both managerial and creative dubbing practitioners navigate this evolving field. As globalised drives towards more efficiency and standardisation intersect with local expertise and working practices, the article offers the notion of "oblique agency" to help capture the dynamics marking the use of creative agency within global dubbing practices, especially in relation to television.

2. Reviewing the Literature

Scholarship on television has not paid much attention to dubbing. This holds true even for research where one might not unreasonably hope—if not expect—to see at least some engagement. While it may risk coming across as churlish to cite any specific examples of this widespread neglect, we will do so now, to help dramatise its breadth and depth: Dubbing gets largely overlooked within work on the global dimensions of television (a half-dozen or so mentions in Parks & Kumar, 2003); the European television industries (one reference in Iosifidis et al., 2005); the global television marketplace (a few quick mentions in Havens, 2006); transnational European television drama (two references in Bondebjerg et al., 2017); Netflix and the geography of digital distribution (a couple of quick mentions in Lobato, 2019); and television drama as storyteller for the global village (one reference in Ríos & Lin, 2021). These are valuable pieces of research by esteemed scholars, who are at least paying more than zero attention, but…not very much more.

There are, thankfully, some exceptions: Works such as Caron (2007), Barra (2013), Adamou and Knox (2011), Knox and Schwind (2019), and Cornelio-Marí (2022) explore dubbed television in more depth. There is a range of critical projects to be noticed: Appearing in an important anthology of television studies, but authored by a historian, Caron (2007) links dubbing to notions of betrayal, limitation, falsification, and compromise, but simultaneously finds choices in dubbed television that she considers "imaginative" (p. 160) and "wonderful" (p. 165). She argues that the French dubbing of *Star Trek* "completely transform[s] the original text" (p. 157) at times, but also that the French version "is not quite the same show as *TOS*" (p. 151). There is less of this uncertainty in the work by Adamou and Knox (2011) and Knox and Schwind (2019), who—in resonance with Barra (2013)—argue for the transformative impact of dubbing. They are also keen to move the conceptual groundwork beyond notions of loss, betrayal, and ventriloquism. Cornelio-Marí (2022) undertakes valuable audience research, unpicking the complexity of the ways in which viewers access programming in different versions and contexts. As valuable as these discussions are, they tend to be short, and methodologically speaking, only Barra (2013) is grounded in practitioner interviews and fieldwork observation (Esser et al.'s [2016] edited collection *Media Across Borders* deserves a mention for giving as much space as it does to TV dubbing, but that responsibility is carried by audiovisual translation scholars).

If we cast a quick look outside of scholarship on television: Film scholars have, comparatively speaking, engaged a little more with dubbing—not surprising, given that their discipline has a longer history and larger

"cohort size"—but here, understandably, the interest has been in dubbed films. In their influential work, which conceptualises dubbing in general as "a kind of cultural violence and dislocation" (p. 52), Shochat and Stam (1985) refer to dubbed television in Brazil such as "Kojak, Colombo [sic] and Starsky and Hutch…[as] a kind of monstrosity" (p. 52). In her discussion of voice dubbing as a form of cultural ventriloquism, Ascheid refers to television, both to praise a successful instance of dubbing (*Starsky & Hutch*) and to frame the fact of German television broadcasting foreign films on two audio channels as "German television…acknowledg[ing] the limitations of dubbing" (Ascheid, 1997, p. 34). Nornes is mostly concerned with the dubbing of Japanese films, noting that: "Television dubbing was always a step or two behind the process for film because of the newness of the technology, the most significant difference being the fact that all broadcasts were live in the first few years" (Nornes, 2007, p. 202).

Whether or not there is something of a pattern here to be detected, of dubbed television being something of a bad object—just as television itself has been far too often in film scholarship—or an unstable (cultural) entity (T. Miller, 2010, p. 154), readers may come to their own conclusions; but we do not think we can rule it out comfortably. Showing that it is possible to do without such tendencies, Dwyer, in her thoughtful revaluation of screen translation, acknowledges that such translation "both *grounds* and *mobilises* screen culture" (Dwyer, 2017, p. 9), but tends to be more focused on film and subtitling than dubbing and television. Overall, however, film scholarship has also shown rather limited engagement with practitioner interviews or fieldwork observation.

Audiovisual translation studies has been using television programmes as case studies (e.g., Ferrari, 2010), but understandably with the methodologies and concerns that preoccupy this discipline, not those of television studies. Chiaro sums it up well with her comment that "research predominantly consists of countless case studies that focus on the comparison of translational choices in specific language pairs" (Chiaro, 2021, p. A124). Chaume's (2004) influential work has argued for research on audiovisual translation to be in closer engagement with both translation studies and film studies and has generally paid more attention to television than television scholarship. His important monograph on dubbing noted:

> Although the degree of perfection is not as high as that demanded by the big screen, television series do include the three synchronization types in all their forms. Television series offer a magnificent apprenticeship for those interested in this area of translation, as all types of synchronization have to be applied, but the final result allows for a greater margin of error than in the dubbing of a film. (Chaume, 2012, p. 76)

Bosseaux uses *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as the case study for her monograph, curiously titled *Dubbing, Film and Performance: Uncanny Encounters*, noting that: "For the sake of simplicity, the word 'film' will hereafter be used to talk about both films and television series" (Bosseaux, 2015, p. 7, note 1). The book draws on scholarship on television only via publications focused on its chosen genre programme and reserves its attention for film mise-en-scene scholarship in order to produce detailed analyses that may be of great interest to television scholars, but who might not easily discover the book due to its framing.

Overall, while the above picture is inevitably painted with broad brushstrokes, we hope it has captured and conveyed the impact of various research paradigms and disciplinary trajectories: There is far from enough scholarship on dubbed television, especially scholarship which moves beyond linking dubbed television to

negativity in some form; which instead draws on the methodological strengths and core debates of television studies; and which is underpinned by insights from practitioner perspectives and industry fieldwork observations. This needed scholarship would be able to engage in both depth and nuance with what may be specific to the dubbing of television, and how dubbing and televisuality may intersect. This article will take a step in that direction. To do so is timely, because dubbing infrastructures and workflows have been undergoing significant change, becoming more globalised in recent years.

3. Methodology and Critical Framework

Given this significant change, this article will examine the intersection of televisuality and dubbing in two main ways: It will map out and reflect on the current industrial infrastructures and workflows for dubbing and then explore how this developing context is affecting dubbing practitioners, including in terms of their perception of and engagement with televisuality. Some of this mapping has been done before (e.g., Barra, 2009; Chaume, 2012; Dries, 1995; Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 2006; Troester, 2002; Whitman-Linsen, 1992), but this is inevitably out-of-date in certain aspects and tends to pay more attention to the workflow at the point when the dubbing scriptwriting commences, less to the overall industrial structure within which this creative labour takes place. Some of this work also shows tendencies towards being descriptive or light on reflection, and/or pays little attention to how the developing infrastructure impacts practitioners (the latter is the case for e.g., Sánchez-Mompeán, 2021).

In terms of its methodological approach, it is important for our research that it is grounded in an extensive series of original interviews as well as fieldwork observation, with the present article informed throughout by the depth and breadth of first-hand original insights gathered over a sustained period of time (Bruun & Frandsen, 2022). Our in-person and online visits to dubbing studios and other spaces in Germany and France since 2017 include observing dubbing recording and scriptwriting sessions, have frequently overlapped with formal and informal interviews, and have allowed us to build trust with and expand our contacts. The 13 practitioners we have interviewed in 2024 alone include staff from several streaming services as well as dubbing scriptwriters, directors, and actors from Germany and France, some of whom hold leadership positions in advocacy associations (Union Professionnelle des Auteurs de Doublage, the French guild of professional dubbing writers; Bundesverband Synchronregie und Dialogbuch, the German federal association for dubbing directors and scriptwriters, and the German guild *Synchronverband*). Our practitioners are located in Europe (although their work is complexly transnational and they have considerable knowledge of other markets between them), and there are inevitably nuances for each national context that we cannot cover within the scope of this article. However, we have aimed to include industry practitioners whose work is located at various points of proximity to the dubbing studio (with a final interview split of 40% managerial and 60% creative professionals), to be able to explore current industry structures and how they may be affecting practitioners "on the ground." Guided by Mills' (2008) reflections on the importance of ethical considerations *after* the interview, we will not provide further details about the identities of those we spoke to. In this way, we have not only been able to secure the interviews with these "exclusive informants" (Bruun, 2016) who have considerable professional insight, but can present our research without having to be concerned about how *our* analysis might be perceived by the companies that employ *them*. This is pressing given this article's focus on contemporary industrial developments and working practices, which are marked by strong concerns about dubbing companies and streamers to manage reputational risk.

In terms of our conceptual terrain, we will reflect on the insights provided through our grounding in professional practice via the lens of televisuality, a term coined by Caldwell (1995) and since understood as a means for comprehending television as a distinct and continually evolving medium. We will engage with televisuality in terms of both industrial structure and (post) production process as well as storytelling and style. Whilst we do not have space to undertake close textual analysis of dubbed television as such, we will explore how practitioners approach the dubbing of television. Here, we will pay attention to dubbing and televisuality both in terms of long-form television marked by narrative complexity (Mittell, 2006) and intertextuality—building on Wehn (1996) and Barra (2013)—as well as style (especially directing and performance, which have hitherto not received sufficient scholarly attention). Our analysis will be located in a post-Bourdieuian framework that is informed by Born's (2000, 2002, 2003, 2010) valuable work, specifically in relation to field, habitus, and agency. We wish to contribute to this framework through a concept that emerged strongly in our research, namely oblique agency: a dynamic whereby agency is both moved away from those who have previously held it, and also at certain points left with them. As we will discuss, those points concern the dubbing of television most acutely, speaking to Bourdieu's understanding of agency, noted by Born (2010, p. 181), as "result[ing] from the improvisatory nature of practice as it is informed by the habitus and meets the conditions of the field."

4. Mapping Currents: The Development of the Globalised Dubbing Infrastructure

We will now begin to explore the current main industrial structures and workflows of the global dubbing industry and to what extent they have been interlocking and interfering with previously established local structures. As all our informants have confirmed to us, the core activities have not fundamentally changed since the advent of dubbing in the last century. Fundamentally, any exported programme (or film) is localised through "national mediation" (Barra, 2013, p. 101) after it has been commissioned and distributed through a global marketplace (Havens, 2006). After the bidding stage, once international production/distribution companies, national broadcasters, or streaming platforms have commissioned a dubbing company, the actual dubbing production is executed. The original content is localised by translators, dialogue authors, "detectors" (in France, who prepare the dubbing script for the recording), directors, dubbing actors, "cutters" (in Germany, who edit and sync the recorded performance), and sound editors and mixers. The quality assurance and release of the content is executed and organised by the local dubbing production companies, broadcasters, international corporations, and distribution platforms.

As the references to "detectors" and "cutters" suggest, the actual process of dubbing and the resulting work chain is highly influenced by the specific techniques employed in individual contexts. For instance, the take-based approach in Germany, Italy, and Spain (in which the dubbing script is divided into short takes that are separately performed/recorded) differs notably from the *bande rythmo* approach in France and Canada (where the dubbing script is included in a scrolling stripe). The differences, challenges, and possibilities of these respective techniques are not the subject of this study, but will be explored in more detail elsewhere (Knox & Schwind, in press). Generally, a dubbing work chain is based on a rough translation, a resulting dialogue script used in the recording studio, and a textual and audiovisual organisation of the original content into takes, followed by the recorded performance. The content goes through different phases of editing, including adjusting and mixing the dubbed voices, compiling original sound such as atmospheres and music with re-recorded sounds, and finalising the overall sound mix.

Importantly, there is a sense of continuity in that the essential craft of dubbing at its core has not changed, even though it has been meaningfully affected by the development of technology (especially the internet and digital technology). There is also a strong sense of consensus, confirmed by all of our informants, that a successful dub meets two criteria: (a) the "invisibility" of the localisation, which means that a local audience is not supposed to be aware of the dubbing; and (b) the consistency and coherence of the original content's tone. We will return to the second criterion, which is particularly an issue concerning televisuality; for now, we can ascertain that the current practice and workflow of dubbing practitioners are characterised by a certain amount of co-creational labour demanding both an understanding of creative/artistic and managerial/organisational practices by all contributors across the work chain and globalised infrastructure.

Whilst there is continuity and consensus, dubbing industries across the globe have also undergone a fundamental change from the 2010s onwards, and most acutely experienced by practitioners since roughly 2020. Key factors are the screen production boom in the 2010s (following the move into original content commissioning by the streamers), a global push towards dubbing as audiovisual translation method (heralded by Netflix, which has been keen to capitalise on its international catalogue across its markets; see Sánchez-Mompeán, 2021), and subsequent international expansion and consolidation of the dubbing industry (with key players keen to secure their profile and leadership position within a fragmenting landscape). The shifts towards expansion and consolidation have facilitated the need for more standardised working practices, efficient workflows and more strategic value creation dynamics across the entire work chain of a dubbing production, with significant developments concerning the intersections of global and local structures. As such, these dynamics have resulted in an evolution of the agency that practitioners experience, which we will address further in Section 5.

To provide more specificity for this changed landscape is only a problem in terms of which examples *not* to pick from the array of mergers and acquisitions. At one point Singapore-based audiovisual translation company Iyuno has developed into a "super agency" due to its global reach and extensive capabilities following a series of business (trans)actions, including merging with Swedish BTI Studios in 2019 and acquiring SDI Media in 2021; with a current network of 67 offices across 35 countries (the company made headline news in August 2024 following a digital security breach that saw Netflix content leaked online). VSI Group has similarly established strategic footholds in markets across Europe, Asia, and the Americas, with ambitions for the Latin American market signalled by its majority acquisition of São Paulo-based Vox Mundi in 2021. Comparatively modest in comparison is the global footprint of the Dubbing Brothers, who, originally from France and having purchased companies including Eurotroll, have a strong focus on Europe. In Germany, Dubbing Brothers' expansion has resulted in the acquisition of the renowned FFS Film & Fernsehen Synchron GmbH, a controversial move that met significant criticism from the local dubbing industry. As several informants confirmed, the merger was seen as "invasive" and "threatening," particularly because of attempts by the company and their newly acquired affiliates to introduce *bande rythmo*, the standard practice in France, to the German market.

With such pronounced expansion and consolidation, international streaming platforms in particular have been successful in interlocking with national markets, through networks of suppliers, referred to as vendors, often based on local structures consisting of companies and dubbing consultants with relevant previous experience and active local networks. For example, Amazon Prime Video runs a global Prime Preferred Vendor Program, about which it claims: "To ensure high quality service and performance, admittance to the

program will require fulfillment vendors to go through the same rigorous evaluation process and must already meet and/or exceed the KPIs stated in the program conditions" (Amazon Prime Video, n.d.). With its "management consultancy, assertive style" (Born, 2003, p. 71), the rhetoric here implies a top-down approach to quality control much more than transfer of knowledge developed within local structures and practices. On an even larger scale, Netflix has been operating the worldwide Netflix Post Partner Program (known as NP3) since 2018. Netflix (n.d.-a) is currently working with approximately 170 (what it publicly frames as) "localization partners." To be included in such programmes, dubbing studios need to enter an application process which can include test or trial productions (partly to demonstrate that applicants can meet the stringent technical delivery requirements), as well as being recommended from within pre-existing industry structures; and final approval rests with the streamers' global research strategy teams.

Structurally invasive practices such as these programmes serve a multi-pronged strategy for the streamers, helping their aims of achieving scalability, efficiency, and the establishment of a more standardised workflow and feedback loop in relation to quality assurance/control. Two particular aspects are worth highlighting in relation to the push for more standardisation and streamlined workflows: firstly, most (if not all) streamers have introduced guidelines for their (key) titles. These guidelines—or "creative letters," as they are known within the industry—originate in the country in which the content is originally commissioned and are usually compiled by a title manager. They include general descriptions of main characters and suggestions that might inform the casting of the voice actors, as well as instructions, for instance, whether original songs should be dubbed, and notes for how to handle the transfer of specific cultural references. Secondly, streamers have introduced online interfaces to facilitate and manage the translation of terms, which function as centralised databases with real-time updates. The most high-profile of these is Netflix's Key Names and Phrases (KNP) tool, which utilises machine learning technology that analyses scripts and undertakes keyword tagging and extraction. Both these guidelines and online databases have been noted by Sánchez-Mompeán (2021), who drew extensively from information publicly available online, but the additional insights lent by our informants underline the irreplaceable value of engaging with practitioners working "at the coalface": The guidelines suggest a more detailed awareness of televisual aspects of TV content, but, as we will discuss, they are not necessarily perceived as fundamentally helpful tools by the creative practitioners themselves. The online databases imply, at least in terms of their public framing, a space for global exchange and discussion (Netflix, n.d.-b), and creative practitioners find the provided glossaries and consistency sheets helpful and time-saving. However, instead of supporting two-way exchange, annotations are usually focused on forestalling possible objections to, or providing alternative options for, the creative practitioners' choices, which, in turn, directly affects their creative agency and ownership of the dubbing process.

The push for more standardisation and streamlining that goes hand-in-hand with the pronounced expansion and consolidation of the globalising dubbing infrastructures is complexly intertwined with advancements in digital technology, which started impacting the dubbing industry in the 1990s, but has made further significant inroads in recent years. All our informants engage with different software programmes and cloud-based collaboration platforms: these include tools for project and work-flow management, which aid task allocation/automation and real-time progress tracking across departments, as well as facilitate content management, via version control, real-time feedback sharing, video timeline annotations, and customisable permissions. Translation management systems, such as MemoQ, offer the handling of "translation memories" (databases that store previously translated units of text) and built-in quality control checks, and thus come

with a correspondingly high price tag. Dubbing-specific localisation software that syncs translations to time-coded audio, such as VoiceQ (which can be integrated with e.g., MemoQ), is also making significant inroads warranting future in-depth investigation.

Interestingly, what emerged in our interviews is a shared perception that the dubbing industry was particularly well-equipped to handle the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic and that inherent structures were not fundamentally challenged (especially compared to other industries). For instance, cloud-based software that enables remote recording, editing, mixing, and distribution, was partly already in use and did not require a particular paradigm shift or change in habitus for the creative labourers of the dubbing industry. Indeed, several informants noted that the pandemic had an arguably positive lasting impact on the German dubbing industry, in that it helped shift working practices away from using printed scripts. It seems to us that the increasing push towards globalisation, and with it accelerated timelines, creates major inroads for AI and other types of digital technologies that deserve attention which exceeds the confines of this article (see e.g., Orrego-Carmona, 2024).

Marked by such expansion, consolidation, and the impact of streamers, the field has seen the establishment of a more overarching and interwoven industrial infrastructure that continues to be developed by a number of leading streamers, production companies, studios, and dubbing companies. One of our managerial informants described this strategically implemented process as based on the necessity of "bridging global standards practices with local practices." Significantly, traditional (national) broadcasting companies have been somewhat sidelined in their prominence by a variety of newly created organisational/managerial positions and functions, diagnostic and symptomatic of a still developing approach to the specificities of the dubbing work chain. Introduced by the streamers, these strategically created mediating positions have job titles such as "language production managers" or "dubbing managers." The managers we spoke to are of the nationality of the localised market they work in, have previous experience of working in the field of linguistic and/or audiovisual translation (including television dubbing), and have an educational background within the humanities. These managerial positions provide a nexus linking the global corporate headquarters and the local industry structures, facilitating information flow and knowledge exchange. They initiate and oversee the entire dubbing work chain, including the final quality control. The establishment of these positions illustrates that the profile of creative agency has been shifting over time and a strategic decision that creatives have to be managed, supported, and contained in quite particular ways in the age of more globalised workflows.

There is a detectable difference between established and emergent dubbing industries when it comes to such managerial positions: in September 2024, Dubbing Brothers USA was looking for a project manager for Japanese–English dubbing, who would, according to the job ad (which we were alerted to via one of our informants), "coordinate all the steps to complete an English dub," act as "the central point of contact between the client and all parties involved" and be responsible for managing the schedule and budget. The person specification emphasised that the candidate "must speak fluent Japanese" but made experience in the dubbing industry optional. This contrasts quite sharply with the job advertisement by VSI Berlin for a project manager in March 2022, which was looking for someone to take on a very similar set of responsibilities, but here, the person specification made it clear that a "higher education background or training with a linguistic/media studies focus as well as relevant professional experience" were required. This speaks to a concern felt by experienced practitioners within the dubbing industry that with the screen

production boom and attendant dubbing boom that emerged in the 2010s, the field overall became less consistently grounded in direct professional expertise.

With deep experience in their industries, the managers we interviewed described a typical work week as consisting of multifaceted activities—a "colourful bouquet" as one informant put it. This includes operational work such as commissioning a dubbing studio, being involved in the casting of voice actors and directors, and occasional visits to the studios to check in on the actual recording. All of them very much describe themselves as "contact persons" for the creative personnel involved with individual productions (or "titles" as is the industry term), available for queries and questions. Their work also has a strategic dimension, such as being involved in recruitment activities (e.g., workshops for scriptwriters in training) and liaising with their counterparts in other countries. The latter includes measures such as knowledge exchange events to discuss the specifics of how the dubbing of specific titles is handled and sharing best practices. Our managerial informants agreed that their work carried a certain "ambassadorial function," especially concerning awareness campaigns for diversity and inclusion, within the local industry structure as well as across borders and higher up the industrial hierarchy.

Remarkably, the managers responsible for the content in various regions usually operate alone or in very small teams. A "bigger team" we encountered consists of a person responsible for German content to be dubbed into other languages, another person for international content to be dubbed into German, plus a manager overseeing both. Here, our managerial informants' claim of consistent availability as "creative sparring partners" for dubbing scriptwriters and directors strikes us as ambitious, if not questionable, given the sheer volume of productions in circulation at any given time and the manifold activities and multifaceted involvement required by their positions. As we will show, there is a discrepancy between this perspective and that of the creative practitioners we interviewed, which, in turn, informs the lived experience of agency for the creative practitioners.

Overall, the infrastructure of television (and film) dubbing worldwide has clearly been undergoing a period of significant transition, becoming more transnational, consolidated, and standardised in its approach to managing the practice of dubbing. Section 5 will examine how this is a dichotomous process, where previously established local/national structures, endowed with relatively high degrees of cultural capital, and traditional practices (in particular in "mature" sectors such as Germany, France, and Italy) have been wrestling with the complexities of this process. This includes the need to reconcile organisational and technical innovations introduced by new clients—both streamers and global dubbing companies—with long-standing tendencies of scepticism and resistance to change. Here, notions of individual creative agency as well as a more collectively perceived autonomy of a very specific branch of cultural labourers are constantly negotiated. We will examine and reflect on the repercussions of these processes, which will lead us to offer the notion of oblique agency.

5. Impact on Practitioners: Moving Towards Oblique Agency

The significant shift towards implementing more globally standardised dubbing working practices around the year 2015, with a clear prerogative to establish more formalised measures of quality control, was understood by several creative practitioners we spoke to as being linked to Netflix's push into English language dubbing. This initial period led to the creation of managerial positions and was characterised by a learning process for

all stakeholders involved, who had to negotiate different dubbing practices and working cultures from a range of countries. It resulted, first and foremost, in the realisation that "line-by-line translation is an illusion," as a dubbing scriptwriter commented. At the time, Netflix tried to implement the use of Excel for dubbing scripts to ensure an overview and standardisation of the corresponding lines between the different versions of a title. It was quickly realised that both linguistic complexities, as well as the transfer of tone, did not lend themselves to such a prescriptive and schematic approach. It is worth noting that the streamers do not necessarily show a better understanding of dubbing than the traditional national broadcasters used to. In this initial period of learning some important lessons, the streamers have, to some extent, been reinventing some wheels long in use.

Today, a noteworthy heterogeneity of lived professional experience seems to prevail amongst the creative dubbing practitioners we spoke to regarding their working relationships with international dubbing companies and streamers. Some claim that it "makes no difference" which company you work for, as they all provide some form of "key names and phrases" tools and guidelines, as previously discussed, and non-disclosure agreements for high-profile content are also a standard practice across the board. However, others have disclosed to us that differences between clients can be quite crucial, with the overall creative workflow depending fundamentally on the individual representative of the client one liaises with. In terms of our analytical approach, it is important to us to recognise said heterogeneity, and we have no intention to try to "resolve" it, recognising the complex relationship between consensus and dissensus that may be found in any given field (Bourdieu, 1993). Rather, with our focus on what happens when globalising structures meet established national working practices and cultures, we set out to identify overarching patterns whilst making space for tension and nuance.

One particular pattern that was strongly apparent from the beginning of the globalising infrastructures intersecting with national dubbing industries, especially very established ones such as in Europe, is a complex mix of cultural sensitivity and intersectional demographics within national dubbing industries. All of our informants confirmed a generational shift taking place within their national industry, using the term "the old guard" to describe dubbing actors, writers, and directors of a certain generation that has dominated their sector since the 1970s. These generational dynamics are characterised by the prevalence of entire families of dubbing practitioners—so-called "dubbing dynasties" (Bräutigam & Peiler, 2015; Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 2006)—such as the Izzo family in Italy, the Kluckerts in Germany, and the Pradier-Bedetti-Trojani cluster in France. Within the context of a general lack of specialist training provision, emerging practitioners here would be inducted and receive on-the-job training from their parents, with some going on to lead a number of dubbing companies, as part of a form of accepted nepotism.

Partly as a result of this, national dubbing sectors have been marked by a habitus that has shown insufficient engagement with issues concerning equity, diversity, and inclusion, both in terms of linguistic translation and casting/crewing choices. One example here is Charles Rettinghaus, who has been the German voice for Black actors such as Jamie Foxx, and whose comments that "I'm white but maybe I have something black in my voice" (as cited in Rodek, 2021) and general observations in his own podcast *Die Stimmen der Anderen* (*The Voices of Others*), in which he interviews other practitioners, suggest a certain lack of self-awareness concerning privilege, access, and gate-keeping. There is a considerable gap, or lack of consensual conception (Born, 2010), between this and the position of both younger practitioners within the national industry, who have shown commitment to "a reflexivity of increasing self-knowledge [and] of voluntary ethical engagement" (Born, 2002, p. 69), and the globalising infrastructures, which are informed by socio-cultural contexts such as the USA,

where there is strong discursive engagement with equity, diversity, and inclusion. The priority placed on equity, diversity, and inclusion by streamers and global companies (which links to their strategic brand management) has not so much fostered friction between these clients and the practitioners "at the coalface" (as the clients dictate the terms), but has actually been helpful for managing generational change: it has provided leverage for younger practitioners to push for more diverse and socio-culturally mindful choices.

It is important to point to the nuance of the dynamics at stake here: earlier attempts by global companies to themselves run workshops to educate (new) practitioners were not very successful, because those workshops offered not tangible enough means of education, in that they were not attached to actual productions and existing workflows. In recent years, a small but impactful number of educational initiatives have been organised by younger practitioners, capitalising on the discursive "direction of travel" set by global companies. For instance, the German guild *Synchronverband* established Diversity-AG, a working group to help raise awareness and push for structural change within the sector. It actively works with the dubbing managers of key streamers to provide guidance, for example, in the form of glossaries to support engagement with issues concerning LGBTQIA+ and anti-ableism and remove barriers to access for emerging talent.

The repercussions of generational shifts can be observed across other industrial contexts, including cultural industries based on long-established artistic practices. However, given the relative smallness of the dubbing sector and the inherent lack of transparency of this "industry operating in the shadows"—a visual analogy made by everyone we interviewed—the impact that globalising infrastructures have had on dubbing practitioners is significant, throwing into relief generational fracture lines while addressing issues of access, awareness, and diversity. As one dubbing manager diplomatically told us, "change management is required," and this speaks to a complex process of knowledge exchange, expectation management and discursive reframing that continues to take place.

We now want to move our discussion to another pattern detectable when globalising structures meet established national working practices and cultures and the "conventions which have become normalised" (Mills & Horton, 2017, p. 11) within them: This pattern concerns "feedback culture" (an umbrella term used within the industry, which includes seeking clarification for queries across the work chain) and creative agency. Previously, national dubbing industries were marked by at best partially formalised workflows and routines in place for queries by dubbing scriptwriters, directors, and sound mixers. If dubbing scriptwriters had questions, they would usually endeavour to find answers themselves, with such problem-solving understood by them as part of their job and a sign of professional achievement and creative ownership. In case of queries that emerge in the dubbing studio, at the intersection of script and performance, the dubbing director could contact the dubbing scriptwriter (or client's representative), and this was in theory also available to dubbing sound mixers; but such opportunities for clarification and cross-checking were not built into the workflow.

Strikingly, this continues to be the case today: One scriptwriter we interviewed actively tries to address this by either asking to attend the recording session or trying to obtain the recording script, including the changes added by the director during the recording. As the scriptwriter explained, this is a deliberate attempt to keep control of the creative transformation of the dialogue from rough translation, via the formalised dubbing script to the actual performed dialogue. However, despite the efforts to claim creative ownership, induced by a high level of professional reflexivity, this approach is by no means integrated into

the standardised routines of a dubbing production, and depends on individual agency and a level of privilege, as such extra labour is not remunerated (issues concerning pay deserve attention that exceed the confines of this article). Streamers have strategically tried to establish more transparent and robust feedback cultures, as it was presented to us by managers; but this has occasionally been met with scepticism by some creative practitioners, who claim that "there's always been a feedback culture in the industry" and perceive these efforts as invasive means of exercising control (which is not untrue). With the pressure of accelerated timelines dictated by globally simultaneous releases of content, it is unlikely that dubbing timelines will be expanded to secure regular opportunities for exchange, and individual practitioners will continue to check in with colleagues on an ad-hoc basis or seek to resolve challenges using their own expertise and judgement to not delay projects. Here, it seems, creative agency has to be claimed individually as it is not formalised as part of the overall infrastructure.

In parallel to this, several practitioners we interviewed spoke to a lived professional experience marked by a generally decreasing degree of creative freedom since the 1990s. It is important to differentiate between a perceived loss of freedom by older practitioners in relation to linguistic and casting/crewing choices (see above), and the limitations experienced by younger practitioners as a result of changing work-flows due to technical innovations and a transformation of structures and hierarchies introduced by companies that operate internationally. With the latter, based on the rhetoric in our interviews, we get the sense that dubbing practitioners—despite the noted concerns about insufficient opportunities for raising queries across the work chain and commonly occurring complaints about "not being seen or recognised as equal partners" in the chain of production of a programme (or film)—very much consider themselves creative practitioners, with a strong urge for independence. One scriptwriter, elaborating on feedback loops amongst practitioners during productions, drew a parallel to collaborations in the field of music, pointing out how negatively it would be perceived by other musicians if peers were perceived to interfere with ongoing projects, or trying to "explain their craft to them." This duality concerning agency creates an interesting, at times challenging, terrain that representatives of the streamers and international companies have to negotiate. As we will discuss next, these issues concerning agency are even more accentuated when it comes to dubbing television specifically.

When asked whether there are (still) fundamental differences between dubbing television and film, almost all the practitioners we interviewed, across both the managerial and creative spectra, responded by first impulsively refuting this idea. On further reflection, they acknowledged a variety of conditions specific to television and the extent to which these affected their labour: with globally simultaneous release dates, timelines have accelerated and the resulting working conditions have become more pressured and complex. An episode of a high-profile show such as *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) takes approximately three weeks for the entire dubbing process in Germany, from rough translation to final sound mixing. If you compare this to the 1980s, when each hour of television—which at the time, on average, would have been marked by less narrative complexity such as specific world-building or intertextuality—to be dubbed would have two to three weeks available for the translation and between one and three days for the recording (Luyken et al., 1991), then it is clear that accelerated timelines and narrative complexity represent far from easy bedfellows for dubbing practitioners in recent years.

Streamers and global dubbing companies recognise this, and have taken measures to address it: Partly rooted in established practice, they seek to commission the same individual or teams for multiple seasons of

long-form programmes—which is only partially experienced as a form of collective agency strengthening by the practitioners themselves—and specifically commission practitioners who have reputations for genre-specific expertise. They have also implemented more structural measures such as the aforementioned glossaries and "creative letters," which are also intended to address continuity issues for the dubbing of long-running TV shows, where, as Barra (2013, p. 110) has pointed out, specific (catch) phrases and meaningful patterns across seasons may slip through the cracks at the intersection of dubbing workflows and television seriality. These hint at a stronger awareness of televisuality, such as narrative and tonal complexity; however, with some probing, these measures reveal themselves to be quite standardised and generic, and not much of a step up from the strategies that Wehn (1996) identified nearly 30 years ago as needed for dubbing cumulative narratives successfully (which included lists of character appearances, episode guides, or lists to track the use of formal/informal second-person pronouns). Crucially, if we remind ourselves of the subtleties involved in issues of tone—which Pye (2007, p. 7) defined in a film scholarship context as referring to "the ways in which the film addresses its spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs"—then it becomes abundantly clear that current structural measures lack the capacity to help practitioners grapple with the narrative and tonal complexities of the content they are working with. These challenges are particularly pronounced when it comes to the first seasons of long-form programmes (see also Ranzato, 2012), which require key decisions to enable diachronic world-building and thus extra care.

Indeed, dubbing scriptwriters have consistently told us that they very regularly have to provide the dubbing script without any, or very little, contextual knowledge of where the rest of a series is going, a process which one practitioner described as "flying blind." This echoes Barra's (2013, p. 110) observation from over a decade ago:

> The Italian mediators' job is, in some ways, "blind": unlike the original authors, dubbing professionals have no idea about how the characters are going to develop, e.g., a minor character (whose voice may have been chosen without much thought) may acquire a major role, thus leading to poor results or drastic changes.

Such resonance is noticeable, not least given the fact that the dubbing manager positions created within the last decade are precisely intended to act as a nexus between globalised corporations and local practices, providing a contact point for queries and questions. Here, we found the most marked gap between the two broader sets of dubbing workforce that we interviewed: the managers see one of their key priorities as providing connective links (further facilitated through e.g., visits to recording sessions) and being readily available for practitioners seeking clarification or a sounding board; while creative practitioners, as one scriptwriter emphasised, find that such queries are perceived as disruptive, and that this perception is conveyed to them. This "dislocation between experience and its managerial representation" (Born, 2003, p. 75) serves as a reminder of "the relational nature of the field and the competitive position-taking characteristic of actors engaged in cultural production" (Born, 2010, p. 177).

Ultimately, while there is a strong consensus within the dubbing industry that the successful handling of issues of tone is one of the two key criteria for a successful dub, as noted earlier, the creative practitioners we interviewed highlighted that the responsibility for handling the narrative and tonal complexity of content to be dubbed is left to dubbing scriptwriters and dubbing directors. For example, all the scriptwriters we

spoke to noted that they compile "self-made" canonical glossaries for long-running content, especially programmes with extensive intertextual lore. Information available online, especially fan forums and other databases, was described as "extremely helpful" for fictional world (re-)building. Dubbing directors manage performance approaches for any number of major and minor roles, connecting granular detail to broader character sensibility and tonal strategies they glean from the script and audiovisual material, drawing on their creative expertise. Their work has been made more challenging through the shift from ensemble recording to individual recording, which became the standard already pre-Covid, but has been further complicated through the use of remote recording, which at the point of writing is not as utilised in European dubbing as it is in other contexts (e.g., Asia and the USA).

So, what we have here is an interesting dynamic: one where some agency and freedom have been moved away from creative practitioners, through the introduction of somewhat prescriptive guidance (e.g., glossaries), software tools, and feedback cultures shaped by corporate approaches and agendas, as well as managerial oversight. To briefly nod to dubbing sound mixing, more recently a level of agency here has been moved away from practitioners in local industries through "centralised mixing" (for some content, the final mix of all localised versions is done in the country of origin, to ensure that particular types of sound effects are done "properly"; our informants date the introduction of this practice to the emergence of blockbuster films such as the Marvel movies.) But, at the same time, some agency is left to these practitioners. This retained agency is felt most acutely in the case of dubbing television, where insufficient opportunities for exchange provide a contrast to the hyper-vigilance exercised for the dubbing of blockbuster films (where strong security protocols for such intellectual property lead to extreme working conditions that deserve further attention). To conceptualise this dynamic, we wish to offer the notion of oblique agency, which, borrowing from musicology, helps us think of the relative motion of two melodic parts in which one moves while the other remains (relatively) in place (see S. D. Miller, 1983). This enables us to capture the push–pull dynamic at stake when globalising structures meet established national working practices and cultures, which we hope will be of use for further scholarship on dubbing and other cultural practices.

We wish to stress the complexity of this dynamic: For example, while creative practitioners tend to be quite critical of the lack of built-in infrastructure for more exchange and support, they also express enjoyment of the creative control this enables for them, which is reminiscent of what they were used to. We also do not mean to imply any criticism of the work of the dubbing managers: Everyone we interviewed displayed a detailed insight into dubbing practices and a commitment to supporting creative practitioners—but there are simply not enough of them to be able to handle the sheer scale of (television) content being dubbed; and as Wehn (1996) noted nearly 30 years ago, there is a case to be made for more oversight with title-specific expertise. The issue we want to highlight is an infrastructural one, namely insufficient investment in dubbing: Guidelines and tools need to be developed further to become more meaningful, and larger teams of managers and expanded timelines would especially help facilitate engagement with televisuality. The ongoing absence of this investment suggests to us that there is, at a corporate level, still insufficient understanding of the challenges involved in dubbing, especially dubbing television—and/or unwillingness to change, because thanks to the creative practitioners and managers, global dubbing works, at least well enough. It may also signal to the creative practitioners that television programmes are perhaps still not getting taken quite as seriously as films by their global clients (see also Whitman-Linsen, 1992).

6. Conclusion

The "'complex machine' that translates, adapts, and prepares the dubbing of every imported TV show" (Barra, 2013, p. 102) has become more complex still as it has become more globalised. Both managerial and creative practitioners have had to negotiate a decisive period of transformation, and change continues apace. The current global landscape is marked by the intersection of accelerated timelines (which drive the need for streamlined workflows and smooth project management and standardisation), small managerial teams (negotiating the intersections of global and local structures/agendas from somewhat liminal positions), and considerable amounts of television content marked by narrative and tonal complexity. While televisuality may not be a concept that practitioners might quickly recognise as a meaningful issue, they are fully caught up in televisuality as it significantly defines their work, both in terms of TV industry infrastructures and the complexity of TV content. Dubbing, and especially dubbing for television, needs to be *still more fully* understood as a significantly creative process by the corporate headquarters, as narrative and tonal complexities cannot be managed through standardised glossaries, but deserve investment to facilitate more space for careful creative decision-making and collaborative exchange.

This challenge of understanding (television) dubbing more fully in terms of its inherent creativity is one that corporate headquarters share with many scholars. As this article has made clear, more research on the intricate developments within the field of globalised dubbing is needed, especially for emerging local industries without long traditions and established fixed routines (Barra, 2013). Such research must free itself from anachronistic views and biases prevalent in previous scholarship, as we have outlined. As has become clear to us after many conversations with managerial and creative practitioners, we have to diverge from Chaume's (2012, p. 76) perspective that for television, "the degree of perfection is not as high as that demanded by the big screen." In fact, we suggest that the development of television, industrially *and* aesthetically, might demand even greater attention to detail by dubbing practitioners to do justice to the narrative and tonal complexities of contemporary television.

Despite its value creation and profound cultural impact on the consumption of audiovisual media around the world, dubbing both as practice and industry is perceived (by all practitioners we spoke to) as fundamentally marginalised within the screen industry. This "shadow existence" feeds into it being a specifically intricate and complex field of cultural struggle (Bourdieu, 1993), marked by noticeable heterogeneity and inconsistency characterising the working relationships between creative practitioners and clients. These interactions, though part of "well-developed professional cultures of reflection and debate" (Born, 2000, p. 422) are "uneven," as they are strikingly individually motivated and negotiated, despite much public-facing rhetoric concerning standardisation. This field of cultural struggle is further marked by a tension, as pushing for more standardisation and top-down quality control has not solved the problems caused by insufficient investment, and as a result, oblique agency has emerged as a palpable but not fully acknowledged dynamic within the field, with a significant gap between the stated perspectives of the managerial and creative practitioners. This strongly suggests to us the need for more opportunities for knowledge exchange and (self) reflexivity, but perhaps somewhat differently facilitated than previous and current efforts led by both streamers and guilds such as the *Synchronverband*, not least given that this oblique dynamic may well affect how pressing challenges such as those posed by AI will be navigated. Finally, we hope that this specific case, namely the impact of globalising structures on local dubbing industries, provides relevant insights for engagement by scholars and indeed practitioners with the dynamics of other fields in which creative

labourers make significant, but perhaps under-acknowledged, contributions to culture that is "worth discussing and remembering" (Mills & Horton, 2017, p. 15).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Simone Knox is associate professor of film and television at the University of Reading, UK. She is a member of the editorial board of *Critical Studies in Television* and the co-author of *Friends: A Reading of the Sitcom* (Palgrave, 2019).

Kai Hanno Schwind is associate professor in media studies at Kristiania University College, Oslo, Norway. He has a background in culture journalism, creative writing and directing for radio, stage, and screen, and is the co-author of *Friends: A Reading of the Sitcom* (Palgrave, 2019).

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ARTICLE

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Binge-Watching Netflix? Insights From Data Donations

Karin van Es and Dennis Nguyen

Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Karin van Es (k.f.vanes@uu.nl)

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Abstract

Netflix is often credited with mainstreaming binge-watching through its release strategy and interface features. However, despite this reputation, data on actual consumption patterns remains scarce, enabling Netflix to shape the narrative about how content is consumed on its platform and what this implies about content quality and viewer attentiveness. This article provides unique empirical insights into Netflix viewing patterns in the Netherlands, based on a pilot study involving data donated by 126 subscribers. It introduces a definition of binge-watching tailored for computational analysis and offers an empirical understanding of its prevalence and manifestations. The findings suggest that binge-watching is a diverse and complex activity. While it is seemingly popular, in that it is practiced by many subscribers, the data suggest it occurs less frequently and is less extreme than would be expected from the hype.

Keywords

binge-watching; data transparency; Netflix; streaming; viewing patterns

1. Introduction

In 2013, streaming service Netflix released all episodes of the first season of its original series *House of Cards* simultaneously, breaking with television's traditional model of scheduled programming. Consequently, the series and follow-up releases were linked to the concept of *binge-watching*, i.e., the consumption of multiple episodes of a TV show in one viewing session. Originally associated with fan cultures, binge-watching gained widespread popularity and entered the mainstream largely due to Netflix's influence (Jenner, 2017). Its significance was further highlighted when binge-watching was selected as the Collins Word of the Year in 2015 ("'Binge-watch'—Collins word of the year 2015," 2015). In its early promotional campaigns, Netflix consistently emphasized binge-watching as a form of viewer control. In 2013, Ted Sarandos, then chief content officer, stated, "Our own original series are created for multi-episodic viewing, lining up the content

with new norms of viewer control for the first time" (Netflix, 2013). The company framed its release strategy as "giving people what they want" and celebrated its technological achievement in understanding audience behavior (Jenner, 2020, p. 270). While many other streaming services initially followed suit, they have since abandoned the binge-release strategy due to their inability to sustain long-term engagement. Netflix, however, remains committed to it—at least for the time being. The uncritical adoption of the term binge-watching by researchers has been criticized by Turner (2021), who argues that it hinders our understanding of contemporary consumption practices. In part, this is because no standard of the term exists, and perceptions and operationalizations of binge-watching are too diverse (Mikos & Castro, 2021, p. 112). Our assumptions about binge-watching, Turner argues, could differ significantly when supported by empirical research (Turner, 2021, p. 235). A major obstacle for such research is the lack of access researchers have to consumption data from streaming platforms. Netflix, for instance, maintained a policy of non-transparency regarding viewership data until late 2018, when it began selectively sharing data about its original series (Wayne, 2022). This trend toward increased transparency progressed with the 2021 release of datasets on the top 10 Netflix titles and continued in late 2023 with the launch of the bi-annual *Netflix Engagement Report* ("What we watched," 2023). However, as Lotz (2023) notes, "Netflix is only sharing information it wants to share." Even today, the number of subscribers watching specific content items remains vague. Empirical data are crucial for researchers analyzing streaming services to better understand their role in culture and society.

Several scholars (Lotz, 2021a; McKenzie et al., 2023; Scarlata, 2023) have tried to analyze usage patterns by analyzing top 10 data or datasets released by Netflix. These studies faced many limitations in dealing with many unknowns. A promising new path towards empirically grounded research into binge-watching is so-called "data donations," i.e., the voluntary sharing of user data for research purposes, made possible by the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Based on Netflix digital trace data donated by 126 subscribers in the Netherlands, this article seeks to answer the research question: What are the prevalence and key characteristics of binge-watching behavior among Netflix users in the Netherlands in 2023?

In this article, we first explore the lack of data transparency around streaming services such as Netflix and how this enables them to define their own success without providing space for scrutiny. We then reflect on the various ways that binge-watching has been researched, the problems with the term's fuzziness, and the lack of empirical studies that would help evaluate Netflix's narratives. Subsequently, we elaborate on our data donations methodology, the data donation packages we received, and how we analyzed these data. Here, we provide our operationalization of binge-watching and analyze how users consume content on Netflix, examining not only the prevalence of binge-watching but also how it happens—including which devices are used, at what times, and which shows are watched. In the conclusion, we reflect on the limitations of the study, the implications of our findings for the understanding of contemporary viewing practices, and avenues for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Netflix and the Mainstreaming of Binge-Watching

In 2013, Netflix commissioned Harris Interactive to conduct an online survey of nearly 1,500 TV streamers about how viewers watch its content. The study found that binge-watching is popular, with 61% of

respondents reporting that they binge-watch regularly, meaning that they watch 2–6 episodes of the same TV show in one sitting. The survey concluded that binge-watching makes shows more enjoyable and that 51% prefer to binge with at least one other person (Netflix, 2013). Boldened, in part, by this survey, Netflix positioned binge-watching as "the new normal" and claimed to have introduced innovative storytelling practices that lead to more attentive viewing (Tryon, 2015). In its promotional discourses, Netflix has used binge-watching to position itself as improving upon traditional television (Wayne, 2022).

Netflix has encouraged binge-watching not only by releasing entire series at once but also through interface features like "skip intro" and "post play" (Jenner, 2023, p. 135). As Jenner (2023) highlights, these strategies have played a role in integrating binge-watching into mainstream television culture. However, the practice of binge-watching has a much longer history, with scholars linking it to earlier control technologies such as VCRs (Kompare, 2005) and DVDs (Brunsdon, 2010). As van Es (2024) cautions, we should critically assess Netflix's narratives about the status of binge-watching on its platform rather than accepting them at face value and reproducing them in academic publications. A key challenge in doing so lies in gaining access to consumption data.

In audience studies, the concept of binge-watching has been examined through various approaches. From a uses and gratification perspective, research has focused on the motivations and needs driving this behavior (e.g., Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Steiner & Xu, 2020). Binge-watching has also been analyzed as a broader audience practice, highlighting behaviors like the "distracted" or "casual" binge-watcher (Tryon & Dawson, 2014). Additionally, there is a tradition of examining television use in everyday life and domestic spaces, providing a deeper understanding of how media consumption structures daily routines and home environments (Bury, 2018; Evans, 2011; Mikos & Castro, 2021). Earlier work in the field of fan studies examined how binge-watching of DVD box sets transformed television consumption (e.g., Hills, 2007; Kompare, 2005).

Turner (2021, p. 231) has rightfully criticized the widespread use of the term binge-watching, arguing that it has been applied to characterize so many different viewing practices. Noting the dominance of a textualist tendency in existing research, he calls for more empirical research. More specifically, he remarks:

> The most curious aspect of television studies' examination of binge-viewing is how little research has involved observing actual audience behavior and how much of the discussion of binge-viewing has been prosecuted instead through the analysis of a select group of television texts, most commonly *Breaking Bad* and *House of Cards*. (Turner, 2021, p. 233)

Most studies that have focused on audiences, he argues, rely on surveys, interviews, or focus groups instead of direct observation. Significantly, self-reported data have been shown to be affected by recall bias or social desirability bias, leading to potential inaccuracies (Wu-Ouyang & Chan, 2023). As such, trace data from Netflix may, despite its own biases and limitations, offer a valuable contribution to the understanding of audience consumption.

In television studies, the concept of binge-watching has been defined in various ways, and it lacks a universally accepted definition (Mikos & Castro, 2021, p. 112). Most definitions, however, share a common focus on viewers watching multiple episodes of the same series rather than episodes from different series or films

(Jenner, 2023, p. 132). Pierce-Grove (2021, p. 98) highlights that discussions about binge-watching often emphasize the number of episodes consumed rather than the total time spent viewing. She explains that episodes act as natural decision points, where viewers decide to keep watching or stop.

2.2. Lack of Data Transparency

Data on audience consumption are scarce. Netflix maintained an anti-transparency data policy until late 2018 when it began selectively releasing data for its original series (Wayne, 2022). A significant policy shift occurred in 2021 with the release of three datasets showcasing the top 10 titles, though these did not include viewing hours. This trend towards greater transparency continued in late 2023 with the introduction of the first bi-annual *Netflix Engagement Report*, detailing six months of content viewing hours, release dates, and content availability. The second report, following criticisms of the first, was said to offer several improvements. Here, they separated films and series and added runtime as well as views (calculated as total hours viewed divided by runtime). These data disclosures can be discussed as a shift to what we propose to call a phatic data policy, in that the release of these datasets is designed to be a performance of transparency with the aim of building a relationship of trust rather than providing meaningful insight into consumption on the platform. Researchers still lack the data needed to evaluate the cultural and societal significance of Netflix and its content. Consequently, they often turn to the limited data that have been strategically shared, the use of proxies such as the top 10 feature, or small-scale qualitative research methods that rely on self-reported information.

2.3. Studies With Real-Life Interaction Data

Given the lack of transparency, both present and past, it is unsurprising that studies on video-on-demand (VoD) services and binge-watching using actual interaction data are extremely rare, with only a handful of such studies available. Trouleau et al. (2016), for instance, analyzed a sampled set of 3,488 anonymized users from a US-based pay-per-content VoD service over a 16-month period from 2014 to 2016. Their study found that while binge-watching accounts for 22.2% of all viewing sessions, it is not a consistent behavior. In fact, 64% of users in their dataset binge-watch at least once, and 11% engage in hyper-binge at least once. These results are almost a decade old, and consumption patterns have likely changed since then. Additionally, viewing habits in a specific cultural setting and on a pay-per-content model likely differ from those of a subscription-based service like Netflix and data collected from the Netherlands.

A more exploratory study by Castro et al. (2021) examined 40 Netflix viewing sessions from 11 millennials in their homes over a 10-day period. The researchers combined data from a browser extension that tracked interactions with the Netflix interface with information from questionnaires. Their study found that binge-watching sessions were more frequent on weekdays than weekends, and that the most popular times to binge-watch were during the evening and night. The average binge-watching session among their participants lasted 2 hours, 10 minutes, and 40 seconds.

Similar to Castro et al., Shao (2024) used the Netflix Viewing Stats browser extension to capture profile-specific activities across various devices and conducted interviews. The study involved a small sample of 31 participants in the US who submitted their viewing data over a one-week period in 2020. Although their primary research focus was not on binge-watching, the findings indicated that repeat viewing

(or binge-watching) was common, with Netflix usage in general peaking at prime-time hours (8 PM–11 PM). A big caveat, however, is that the data collection period coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. This period is known to have significantly increased streaming video consumption, likely skewing the results.

Overall, these empirical studies show that binge-watching is a popular practice, but they also emphasize the variability in binge-watching behavior. However, questions remain regarding the generalizability of these findings. The latter two studies, in particular, underscore the difficulties in acquiring reliable viewing data, often leading to small sample sizes, limited demographic representation, and limited time frames being covered by the dataset.

3. Methods: Data Donations

In this pilot study on Netflix binge-watching, we make use of the data donations framework as laid out by Boeschoten et al. (2022). Under the GDPR, citizens have the right to access and receive a copy of their personal data from data processors such as Netflix. The data donations framework enables users to share their profile data from different online platforms and digital services with researchers in a privacy savvy way.

For practical reasons, the present study focuses on the Netherlands. In September 2013, Netflix entered the Dutch media landscape, and since then, competition has expanded significantly. Nonetheless, Netflix dominates the subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) market and is accessible in nearly half of all households in the Netherlands (49%), significantly surpassing its closest competitor, RTL Videoland, which has a market share of 20% ("Netflix dominates Dutch streaming market," 2023). However, many streaming platforms are experiencing financial difficulties, and there is a slowdown in the previously rapid market growth (Commissariaat voor de Media, 2023). This explains the recent crackdown on Netflix password sharing, which was implemented to discourage users from sharing accounts and to encourage them to get their own subscriptions.

For our study, Netflix subscribers in the Netherlands were asked to share their data as Data Download Packages (DDPs) to research consumption behavior. In collaboration with the panel recruitment company Ipsos I&O, 401 respondents were invited to complete a survey on their Netflix usage and then asked to share their Netflix data via a secure sharing portal, Port (Boeschoten et al., 2023). This platform, integrated into participants' web browsers, extracts only the data relevant to the study from their DDPs. Participants could review and delete any data they did not wish to share before donating. Only data from the main account holders, who gave consent, were collected, and respondents identified their personal profiles to ensure only their data were included.

The 401 respondents were recruited via panel sampling to include different demographic backgrounds. The average range for all respondents was 49 years, with a range from 18 to 65. They also evenly split into male and female respondents (52% vs 48%, respectively). Of all respondents, only 126 (31.4%) successfully donated their data. The average age of respondents who donated their data is 41.9 years, with a range from 18 to 71. The majority identifies as male (61.1%), with noticeably fewer female respondents in the sample (38.9%). Most respondents share their Netflix account within the same household (70.6%) but fewer do so with others outside of their household (31%). Compared to all survey respondents, the subsample of users who donated their data is, on average, younger and more skewed towards male respondents.

To address the research questions, the different computational analyses of content consumption primarily relied on viewing activity data. Furthermore, the analysis only focused on TV shows. Inspired in part by Turner (2021, pp. 236–237), the main goals were to explore:

- How many users engaged in binge-watching, and what percentage of the total viewing sessions did binge-watching account for?
- At what times of the day and week is binge-watching most prevalent among Netflix users, and what devices are most frequently used for binge-watching?
- Which Netflix series had the highest number of unique binge-watchers, and to what extent do users overlap with the series they binge?
- What clusters of binge-watchers can be identified based on patterns of day–time combination, show length (short vs. long), preferred device type, number of sessions, and average session length?

All analyses were executed in Python 3.

Relying on interaction data to explore binge-watching is not without limitations and uncertainties. Netflix's approach to predicting user behaviors and preferences relies heavily on this data without considering the underlying motivation behind users' actions. This practice has been described by Rouvroy (2013, p. 143) as "data behaviorism." Likewise, while we can identify patterns, we cannot explain them. That would require additional, more qualitative methods. Put differently, interaction data reduce the complexities of human behavior and often lacks contextual meaning (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 670). For example, account sharing on Netflix blurs lines between what different users are doing on the platform. Additionally, for some users, Netflix is seen as "a kind of electronic companion or video wallpaper" (Tryon & Dawson, 2014, p. 227). This challenges the assumption that every interaction equates genuine interest and highlights the inherent uncertainty as to whether viewers are actively watching. Moreover, as van Dijck (2014, p. 199) notes, platforms are not neutral intermediaries; rather, they are influenced by technological and commercial biases. These biases influence what data are collected; prioritizing information relevant to their business objectives. Nevertheless, analyzing interaction data can provide useful insights into general consumption patterns and trends, helping to interrogate Netflix myths.

3.1. Defining Binge-Watching

Based on a transdisciplinary review, Merikivi et al. (2020, p. 702) propose a convergent definition of binge-watching as the "consumption of more than one episode of the same serialized video content in a single sitting at one's own time and pace." While the definition has been criticized for the low number of episodes (Mikos & Castro, 2021, p. 112), it is useful for our purposes because it provides the following clarifications. Binge-watching concerns: serialized video content (TV series) and watching the same series consecutively in one session.

Serialized content describes TV shows that consist of several episodes and, possibly, seasons. To watch a series or "show" consecutively within a session means that several episodes are watched in a row. Nonetheless, the definition still raises some methodological challenges. For starters: How do you count the consumption, or rather "views," of an episode? If we turn to Netflix, they had originally defined a view as completing at least 70% of an episode or movie. However, in 2019, they redefined a view as watching two minutes of the

content item, which, to them, sufficiently indicated the intent of viewing. This definition was also short-lived, highlighting the subjective and constructed nature of what constitutes a "view." Presently, Netflix measures views by dividing the total hours watched by the total runtime of a show or movie. This approach is frustrating for our understanding of the popularity of content because it obscures the actual number of unique viewers, as repeated viewings are also included in the calculation.

An equally important aspect of defining binge-watching is the question of what counts as a single session. Castro et al. (2021, p. 9) consider a viewing session as "any viewing activity that is bounded by 15 min of non-viewing before and after," arguing that a longer break would break immersion. However, we found this "rule" too strict (e.g., watching six episodes of a series at night and having a 45-minute break between episodes three and four would have been treated as two separate sessions). After inspection of examples for different thresholds, we observed that lower thresholds seemed more prone to splitting what actually appeared to be single sessions. Eventually, we found that a 60-minute interval best matched the intuitive understanding of a session, as most inspected examples looked like completed, separate sessions in comparison to one another; this threshold also aligned with the duration set in a previous study (Trouleau et al., 2016). Furthermore, while Merikivi et al. (2020) suggest considering individual viewing patterns as a basis to more accurately operationalize binge-watching based on users' personal pace, our more uniform approach is sufficient for the general exploration of content consumption.

To identify sessions we first, for each user ID, checked the time difference between consecutive activities (interacting with a title on Netflix). If the gap between activities exceeded 60 minutes, the session was marked as "completed," and a new session began. Titles watched consecutively with breaks of less than 60 minutes were grouped into the same session. This approach ensures that all viewing activities within a 60-minute window are considered part of the same session. Additionally, at least one title needed to be fully watched for the session to be valid. Finally, we assigned session IDs to these groups of titles.

To identify binge sessions, however, further criteria needed to be included. We decided to operationalize a binge session as follows:

- A session must have at least three watched items, with at least two of them marked as fully watched (at least 70% viewed of the total runtime).
- In addition, a session must consist mostly of episodes from the same show, meaning that more than 50% of the items in the session come from a single show.

Sessions meeting the above criteria are labeled as "Binge" in the original dataset, while all other sessions are marked as "Non-Binge."

In this article, we focus on viewing data for TV shows in the year 2023. By default, Netflix viewing data have interaction data for watched titles per user, including a user ID, start time, number of hours watched, title name, and device used. We enriched the data by labeling each title for its content type (TV Show, Movie, Documentary, Other), the show title where applicable (since the default data list individual episodes), the release year, total runtime, percentage watched, and an indication whether a title was fully watched or not (based on a 70% threshold).

The final dataset included 51,635 individual interactions with TV shows on Netflix in 2023 for 126 users. These were grouped into 10,519 sessions, of which 3,389 sessions (32.2%) met our criteria to count as a binge session. The following analyses focus only on the binge sessions.

4. Analysis

4.1. How Popular Is Binge-Watching?

We have found various metrics that support the claim that binge-watching, under our lenient definition, is fairly popular (in terms of how many people do it) and common (in how frequently it occurs). Our dataset for 2023 includes a total of 15,958 hours spent watching TV shows on Netflix, with 8,537 hours (53.5%) being part of binge-watching sessions. In that year, 116 users (92%) had at least one binge-watching session. After removing 10 extreme outliers from the analysis, the average number of binge sessions per user was 21.5. The most common number of sessions (mode) was 2, while the median number of sessions was 18.5.

Excluding eight outliers (based on interquartile range), the average length of a session is roughly 2.28 hours, with the median session duration close to 2.14 hours. The mode session length is 2.06 hours, suggesting a frequent pattern of sessions lasting just over 2 hours. The shortest session is 0.47 hours (around 28 minutes). This concerned a user who watched two full episodes of *Gudetama: An Eggcellent Adventure*, a Japanese series with a runtime of 10 minutes per episode. This finding immediately raises questions about how we have chosen to define binge-watching, as it likely wouldn't be intuitively categorized as bingeing by most people. Still, these are rare exceptions, and most users watch content that is considerably longer. The longest binge session in our corpus is just under 5 hours.

On average, we found that users watched approximately 3.1 full episodes per binge-watching session, with adjustments made for outliers. The median is 3 episodes, indicating that half of the session consists of 3 or more episodes. The most common number of episodes watched (the mode) is 2, while the standard deviation is 1.25, reflecting moderate variation in the number of episodes watched. The number of episodes watched per session ranges from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 7, suggesting that most binge-watching sessions consist of a relatively small number of episodes. These results highlight a tendency for users to watch between 2 and 3 episodes during a typical binge session.

Since there is no universally accepted definition of binge-watching, and we opted for a more lenient one, we felt it important to consider the impact of adjusting our definition and explore how it might affect the understanding of binge-watching. Table 1 shows that, with higher thresholds for watched content items, the overall proportion of binge sessions declines. The (near) identical percentages for total sessions and weekly average sessions indicate a consistent distribution. Overall, we see that while more "extreme" binge-watching occurs, it only seems to account for a small fraction of all sessions. Overall, however, bingeing remains fairly popular and common. This aligns with previous empirical research using log data (Shao, 2024; Trouleau et al., 2016). It is also important to note that the percentage of users engaging in binge-watching, regardless of which threshold is used, is significantly higher than the 2016 findings from Trouleau et al. for pay-per-content services (Trouleau et al., 2016). It is also much higher than reported in the 2013 Netflix-commissioned study (which relied on self-reported data, potentially leading to underreporting, but also used a two-episode threshold; Netflix, 2013).

Table 1. Comparing definitions: changing the threshold (adjusted for outliers).

	2 watched	3 watched	4 watched	5 watched	6 watched
# users	116 (92%)	108 (86%)	88 (70%)	69 (55%)	53 (42%)
% total sessions	32.2	14.8	8	4.7	2.8
% weekly average sessions	32.1	14.8	8	4.7	2.8

4.2. When Do Users Binge?

Figure 1 shows the number of binge sessions over the course of 2023, highlighting weekends (orange) and selected holidays in the Dutch calendar (red: Easter, Liberation Day, King's Day, Ascension Day, Christmas, New Year's Day, Pentecost). Here, peaks for binge-watching sessions appear throughout the year, but notable spikes coincide with weekends and holidays. A more in-depth analysis shows that the average number of binge sessions mostly happened on weekends. On average, there were 8.99 sessions on working days compared to 11.47 sessions on weekends. A two-sample t-test was conducted to compare the average number of sessions on working days and weekends. There was a significant difference in the number of sessions between working days ($M = 8.99$, $SD = 3.11$) and weekends ($M = 11.47$, $SD = 3.71$), $t(363) = -6.50$, $p < .001$. Binge sessions are seemingly not exclusive to weekends and holidays.

Another important factor influencing binge-watching appears to be the time of day. Figure 2 shows the frequency of sessions per hour of the day (i.e., how many were started at that hour). Most binge-watching sessions occur in the evening, accounting for 41% of the total, while 36.5% take place in the afternoon. Morning sessions are less common, making up 16.9% of the total, and nighttime sessions are the least frequent at 5.4%. For this analysis, the sessions were further categorized into four time periods: Morning (6 AM–12 PM), Afternoon (12 PM–6 PM), Evening (6 PM–12 AM), and Night (12 AM–6 AM). A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of time of day on the number of binge-watching sessions, $F(3, 1143) = 155.75$, $p < .001$, with evening ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.85$) showing the highest number of sessions, followed by afternoon ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.91$), morning ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.14$), and night ($M = 1.19$, $SD = 0.51$).

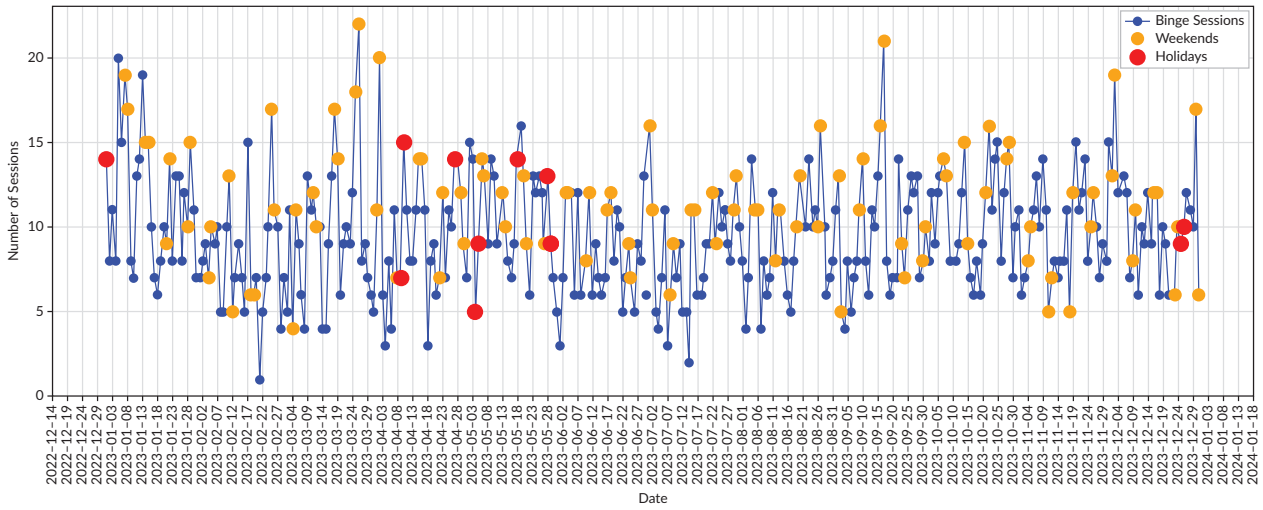

Figure 1. Binge sessions over time.

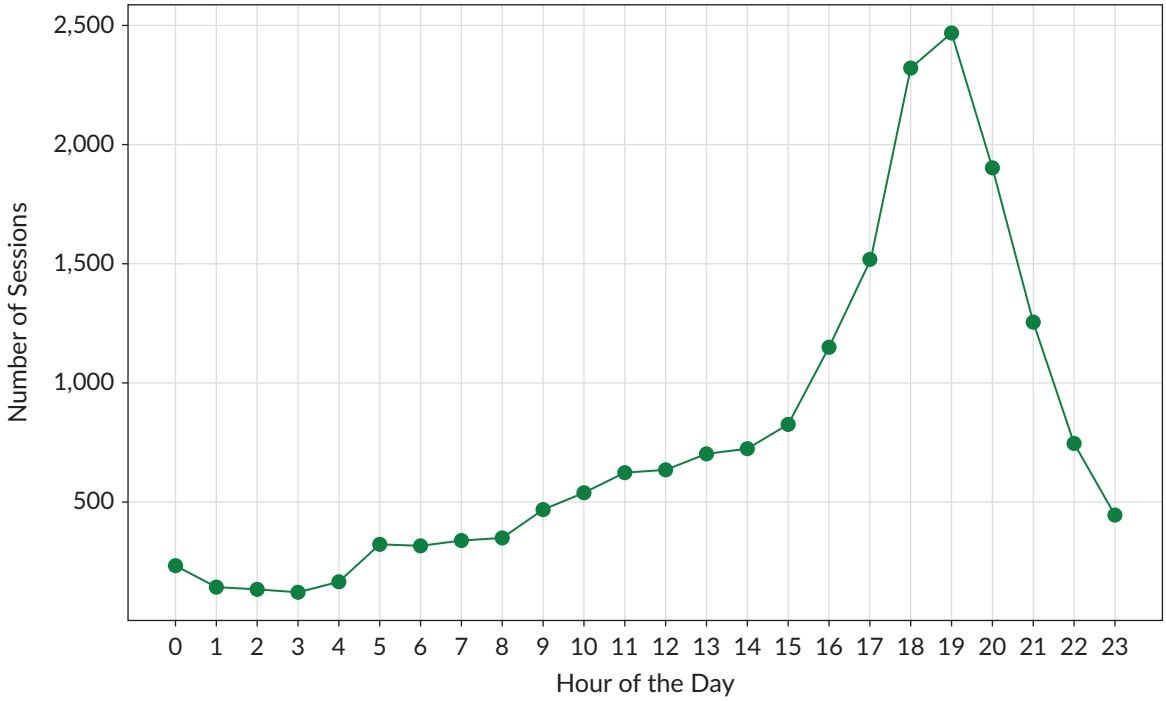

Figure 2. Number of sessions over the day.

Zooming in on common day and time combinations for binge-watching sessions (Figure 3) reveals a preference for evenings, particularly on weekdays. Notably, 19.5% of all binge sessions occur on weekend evenings (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday). Interestingly, Sunday afternoons emerge as the most popular time for binge-watching. Trouleau et al. (2016) discovered that viewing behavior on VoD services varies based on factors like the day of the week and time of day—patterns that similarly apply to binge-watching habits.

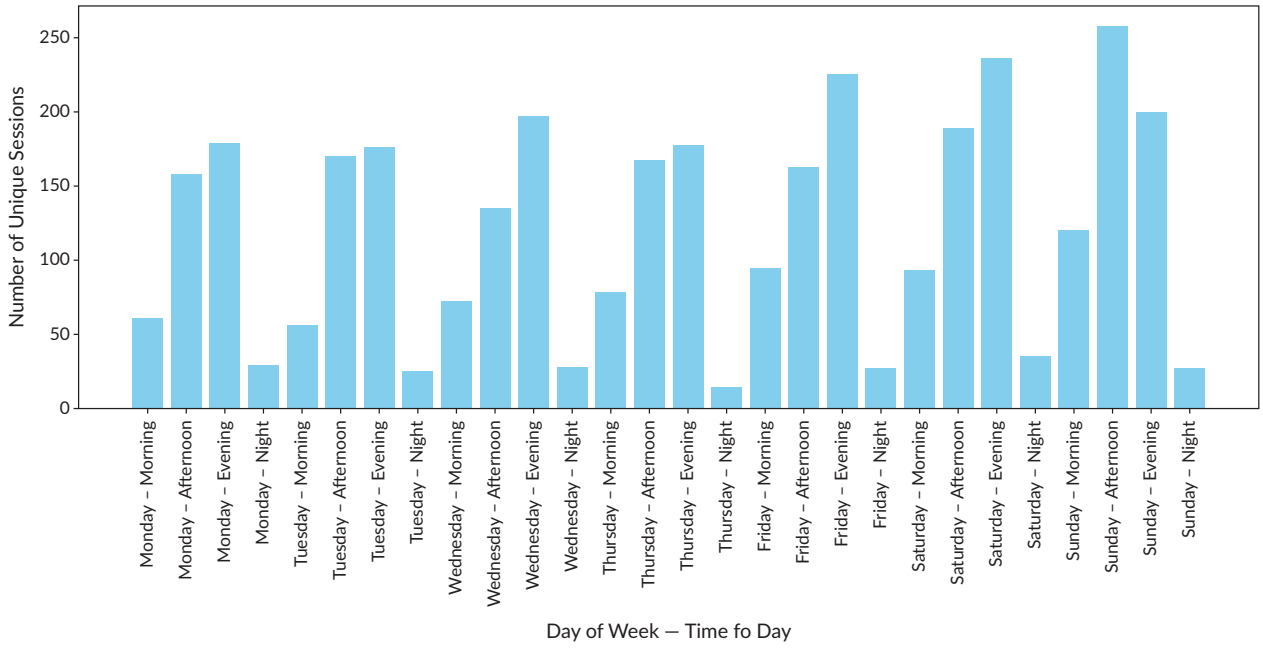

Figure 3. Popular time periods for binge sessions during the week.

4.3. On What Devices Do Users Binge?

When looking at the devices used for binge-watching sessions (see Table 2), users mostly watch multiple episodes in succession on TVs, with fewer viewings on mobile devices and tablets, and PCs/laptops.

Table 2. Devices used for watching TV on Netflix in 2023 from subscribers in the Netherlands.

	Binge	Non-binge
TVs (incl. streaming boxes and game consoles)	72.6%	64.4%
Mobile phones/tablets	14.2%	25.3%
PCs/laptops	13.1%	10.2%

These percentages per device for binge closely mirror official data released by Netflix in 2018 concerning all viewing on the platform (see Kafka, 2018). Most viewing occurs on TVs. Table 2 shows that these percentages are noticeably different when looking at the devices used for watching TV series on Netflix during non-binge sessions. In particular, we find an uptick in mobile phones and tablets in non-binge sessions. A possible factor explaining these differences might be variations in content type (e.g., complex vs. snackable) or viewing situation (e.g., individual vs. collective).

Digging deeper into this matter, we looked at the distribution of long versus short TV shows across device types. TV shows were broadly categorized into short (less than 30 minutes runtime) and long (more than 30 minutes runtime). There are 720 unique show titles in the dataset, of which 576 (80%) count as long shows and 144 (20%) as short shows.

Almost 80% of viewings on TVs concern long shows, compared to 75% for PCs/laptops, and 59% for mobile devices. Shorter shows are more commonly consumed on mobile phones and tablets. The observed differences between device types vis-a-vis show length are statistically significant ($\chi^2[2, N = 18{,}424] = 555.63$, $p < .001$). This has been further supported by analyzing the device types and the average runtime of watched shows. A Kruskal-Wallis test revealed a significant difference in show runtimes across device types, $\chi^2(2) = 354.40$, $p < .001$, with shorter runtimes on mobile devices ($M = 37.6$, $SD = 14.1$, $N = 2{,}623$) compared to longer runtimes on PCs/laptops ($M = 42.56$, $SD = 15.44$, $N = 2{,}424$) and TV ($M = 42.77$, $SD = 13.91$, $N = 13{,}377$), findings supported by an ANOVA, $F(2, 18221) = 146.25$, $p < .001$. Shorter shows are more likely to be watched on mobile devices and longer ones are more common on TV and PCs/laptops. The choice of screen type for binge-watching may thus be influenced by differences in viewing habits, such as whether the viewing is done individually or in a group.

4.4. What Do Users Binge-Watch Most?

Figure 4 displays a classic long-tail distribution ($N = 720$) of binge-watched shows. The steep rise indicates that a small number of shows attract a significantly larger audience, while the majority have only a small number of viewers. Out of the 116 unique users that binge, 81.9% binged the top 15 shows, 78.5% the top 10 shows, and 63% the top 5 shows. A small number of TV shows seem to attract the most attention, i.e., have a large audience share. This raises questions about the role of niche content on the platform and the cultural power of specific content items. Bars in red mark Netflix Originals in the top 20 shows based on unique viewers.

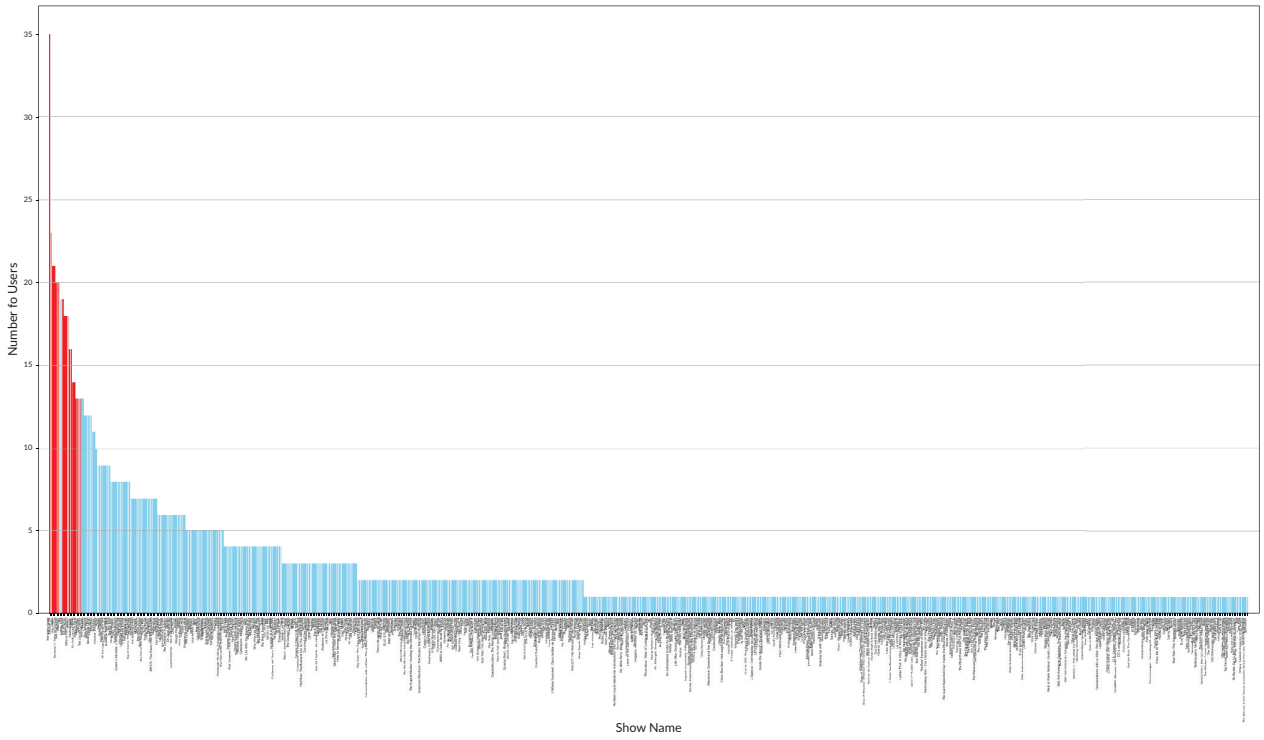

Figure 4. Unique users per TV show title.

Table 3 confirms that the top 10 most binge-watched TV shows, based on unique users, are primarily Netflix Originals, identifiable by the red "N" in their title artwork. (Even though *Knokke Off* isn't an Original in the Netherlands, it is a Dutch-Flemish co-production between Dingie, VRT, and Netflix). The dominance of Netflix Originals and co-productions raises the question: Are these series truly as bingeable as Sarandos suggests, or are they simply more visible and easier to discover due to Netflix's interface layout and recommendation system? Have they also benefited from the batch release strategy? Or is it a combination of all these factors?

Table 3. Top 10 TV shows based on unique users and average episodes per session.

Show	Netflix Original TV shows	Number of users	Average episodes completed per session	Runtime (min)
The Night Agent	Yes	35	3.6	45
Knokke Off	No	23	4.3	35
Lupin	Yes	21	4.1	46
The Crown	Yes	21	3.5	56
Formula 1: Drive to Survive	Yes	20	3.7	38
Manifest	Yes	20	4.8	42
Sex Education	Yes	20	4.7	52
Liebes Kind	Yes	19	3.4	48
You	Yes	19	3.8	47
The Witcher	Yes	18	4.2	58

Interestingly, *Manifest* and *Sex Education* have a notably higher average number of episodes completed per session, while *Liebes Kind* and *The Crown* have lower averages. Since *Sex Education* and *The Crown* have similar runtimes, this suggests that episode runtime is not the main factor influencing how many episodes are watched in one sitting. Further investigation, particularly through qualitative methods, could help clarify this behavior.

Returning to the question of device type, Figure 5 suggests the devices used for watching the top 10 TV shows based on unique users. Here, we find noticeable differences, such as *The Witcher* and *The Crown* being mostly streamed on PCs/laptops, while *Liebeskind* and *Sex Education* are mostly watched on mobile devices; users watching *The Night Agent* and *Manifest* do so primarily via TVs. Again, various factors may explain these differences (e.g., individual versus collective viewing of these series), necessitating further research.

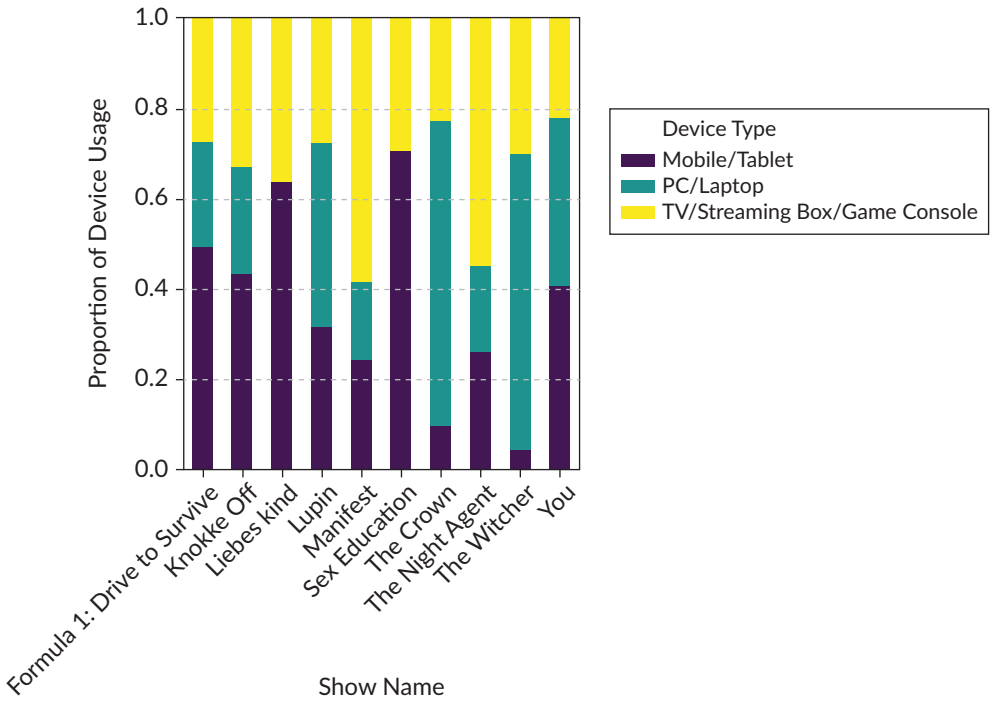

Figure 5. Top 10 TV shows and devices.

4.5. What Different Types of Binge-Watchers Can Be Identified?

We also explored whether there are different types of binge-watching users using a cluster analysis considering the following features: day–time combination, show length (short vs. long), preferred device type, number of sessions, and average session length. We herein expand Trouleau et al.'s (2016) approach, which identified user groups based on watched episodes per session. Corresponding to their research, it becomes apparent that binge-watching is not a consistent behavior.

The optimal number of groups (or clusters) was determined using Silhouette scores, which evaluate how well items fit within their assigned groups compared to others. Using this method, k-means clustering was applied to divide binge-watch users into two groups. These groups differ primarily in terms of session count and session length (Figures 6 and 7). The remaining categorical features do not show statistically significant differences between the clusters, suggesting they play a less important role in defining the groups.

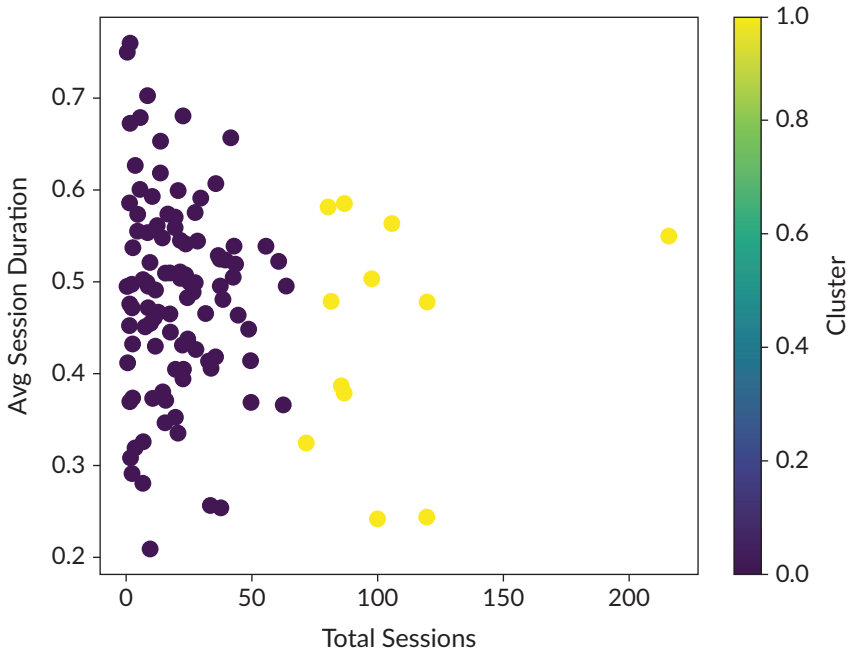

Figure 6. User clusters.

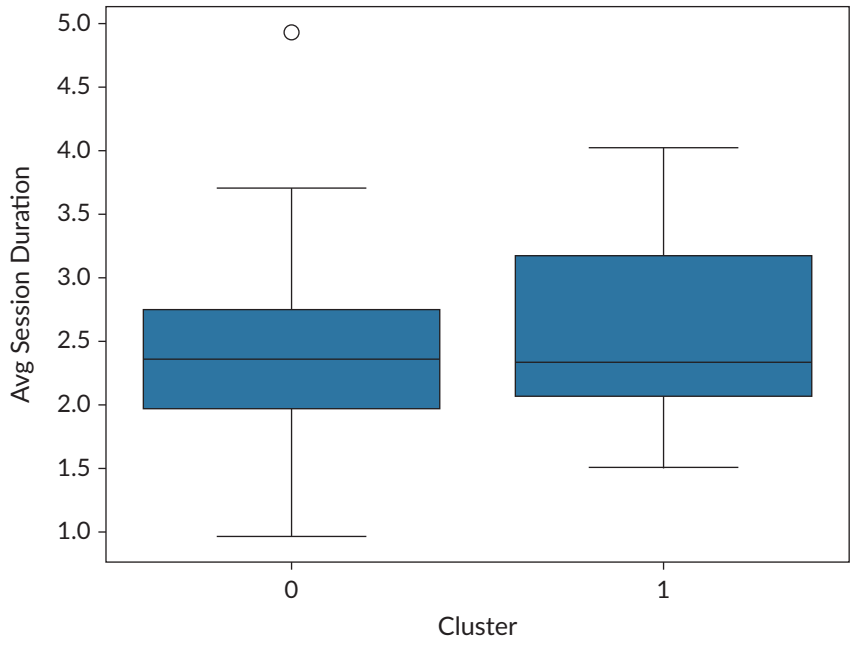

Figure 7. Average session duration per cluster.

The two clusters can be described as "Sporadics" (purple) and "Regulars" (yellow). The Sporadics group consists of users with fewer total sessions, typically under 50, and session durations averaging between 1 to 4 hours, with a mean of 2.39 hours. There is no significant correlation between the number of sessions and session duration in this group, suggesting that these users engage in a wide variety of session lengths, possibly reflecting diverse binge-watching habits, such as opportunistic viewing of specific shows. In contrast, Regulars have significantly more sessions, usually ranging from 70 to 200, with average session

durations between 1.5 to 4 hours and a mean of 2.64 hours. In this cluster, users with a higher number of sessions tend to have slightly longer average session durations (suggested by a moderate positive correlation of 0.39).

In our cluster analysis, only two data points emerged as relevant for clustering users: session duration and number of sessions. Based on these, users were split into two large groups with variation within each. This is only one example analysis based on one operationalization of binge-watching. Importantly, content features such as genre or show origin could not be included. Further research is recommended here.

Both clusters have similar ranges of session durations, but Regulars tend to have a slightly higher median and a broader range. While Sporadics have more extreme outliers, their session durations are generally shorter compared to Regulars. This suggests that Regulars typically engage in longer sessions on average, though there is still considerable overlap between the clusters in terms of session duration.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

With this pilot study, we have provided unique empirical insight into viewer consumption on Netflix using data donations, and we hope to have paved the way for the utilization of this method for future research into VoD services. Oscillating between theory and our data, we settled on a definition of binge-watching suitable for analyzing interaction data with computational methods. This exercise demonstrates the complex interpretative work that goes into developing methodologies to calculate binge-watching.

Overall, this study suggests that binge-watching is a popular and common practice on Netflix. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that the majority of viewing sessions are not binge-watching sessions. In fact, most users typically watch a single episode at a time. Additionally, we found that binge-watching is influenced by both time and day, occurring mostly on weekends and during the evenings, with Sunday afternoons being the most popular time for this activity.

Somewhat surprisingly, despite the rise of tablets and smartphones, most binge sessions happen via TVs, including streaming boxes and game consoles. We also observed a long-tail distribution favoring Netflix Originals. Finally, we note that binge-watching takes on many forms, as our data identified two distinct types of binge-watchers: Sporadics and Regulars. In general, we would conclude that binge-watching is a diverse, complex, and multifaceted activity, which explains why there is no single, consistent definition.

While this research provides much-needed trace data to support theoretical work on binge-watching, it raises discussions and reflections on its limitations. First, our data come from voluntary donations and do not offer a representative sample of Netflix subscribers in the Netherlands, making these findings exploratory and potentially skewed. They do, nonetheless, offer more detailed insights into Netflix viewing habits than previous studies have achieved and function as a proof of concept.

Second, Netflix is unique in its strategy, as noted by Lotz (2021b) in calling it a “zebra amongst horses.” The question then becomes: How does this compare to other VoD services? Additionally, how does it compare to traditional television? While the binge-watching model remains prevalent in the release strategy on Netflix, it has gradually been losing momentum as it has been using a staggered release method for some

of its content. It has also started an ad-supported tier in certain territories and is increasingly experimenting with live-streaming. Both strategies are likely to influence content production, circulation, and consumption. Therefore, it is important to consider, analyze, and reflect on how these practices have evolved over time.

Third, interaction data serve as a proxy for direct observation, but this comes with limitations. Many qualitative and contextual aspects of viewing practices are not captured in digital trace data. For example, we do not know how content was presented to participants by the recommender system or in the interface and if it was *seen* by participants. Furthermore, the quantitative data cannot explain why or how people choose to watch streaming content. This is exactly the type of research that Turner (2021) has also called for. A lot of complexity and context is lost, which could be restored by supplementing data donations with other methods such as participant observations and interviews.

Finally, the definition of binge-watching could be refined by first establishing each user's "normal viewing behavior" and then identifying significant deviations, similar to Trouleau et al. (2016). This approach would provide a more flexible and individualized understanding of unusual viewing patterns. Aside from this, future research opportunities include comparing different streaming services, analyzing multiple territories, but also interrogating Netflix myths like content popularity and locality, and exploring the diversity of viewing habits.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Karin van Es is an associate professor at the Department of Media and Culture Studies and the Humanities lead of the Data School at Utrecht University. Her research addresses the datafication and algorithmization of culture and society, with a specific interest in streaming video. She has published in outlets such as *Television & New Media*, *Convergence*, *Social Media + Society*, *Big Data & Society*, *Journalism Studies*, *Critical Studies in Television Studies*, and *First Monday*.

Dennis Nguyen is an assistant professor for digital literacy and digital methods at the Department of Media and Culture Studies at Utrecht University. His research focuses on critical data studies, public epistemology, and computational methods for researching media, with a particular interest in multimodal discourse analysis and public sphere dynamics. He has published in outlets such as *AI and Society*, *Information Communication and Society*, *Internet Policy Review*, *Journalism Studies*, and *Journalism Practice*.

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ARTICLE

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Rewatching Content on Streaming Platforms: The Pursuit of Ontological Comfort

Ignacio Siles [1], Rodrigo Muñoz-González [1], Luciana Valerio-Alfaro [1], and Vanessa Valiati [2]

[1] School of Communication, University of Costa Rica, Costa Rica
[2] Department of Communication and Media Studies, Feevale University, Brazil

Correspondence: Ignacio Siles (ignacio.siles@ucr.ac.cr)

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Abstract

Why do people tend to rewatch series and films when they have numerous new options at their disposal? This article develops the notion of rewatching on streaming platforms as an essential and enduring aspect of televisuality. Our analysis draws from diary reports completed during one month by 40 streaming platform users in Costa Rica, as well as focus group conversations with 13 of these participants. We examine rewatching as a pursuit of *ontological comfort*, that is, the sense of well-being derived from people's understanding of everyday life and their conscious capacity to act in it. We argue that rewatching expresses an active search for stability, predictability, and orchestrated surprise through the narratives and conventions of certain televisual genres and the self-schedule affordances of streaming platforms. This study thus examines the nuanced significance of rewatching and its fundamental connection to the notion of comfort.

Keywords

audiences; comfort; Latin America; ontological security; rewatching; television; television genres; temporality

1. Introduction

The so-called "age of streaming" is commonly referred to as a period of abundance. According to Echauri (2023, p. 2), "infinity" is the prevailing media paradigm of our time, profoundly influencing the "landscape and experience" of contemporary media. Similarly, Boczkowski (2021, p. 1) contends that dwelling in a world of "abundance" and "information plenty" is a singular historical product of technological advancements and

content innovations. Arditi (2021) goes on to depict the current era as characterized by "unending consumption," a defining element of platform capitalism.

Given this landscape, why do individuals opt to rewatch series and films when seemingly limitless new options are available? What prompts rewatching in an era of "infinite" and "abundant" media? Rewatching remains an enduring feature of televisuality, spanning various media technologies such as DVDs, cable, and reruns throughout television history (Kompare, 2006). Yet, within the exploration of "streaming cultures," rewatching is often overlooked and overshadowed by the study of other important phenomena like binge-watching practices and the influence of algorithms (Arditi, 2021; Siles, 2023; Siles, Espinoza-Rojas, et al., 2019).

This article contributes to the study of televisuality by conceptualizing rewatching as a fundamental practice of the "televisual audience" (Caldwell, 1995) and examining its role in everyday life within the context of streaming technologies. While existing literature has explored the pragmatic reasons behind rewatching series and films, our contribution lies in investigating rewatching as a pursuit of ontological comfort. *Ontological comfort* describes the sense of well-being that stems from people's understanding of everyday life and their conscious capacity to act in it. We argue that rewatching represents an active quest for stability, predictability, orchestrated surprise, and a grasp of their ability to navigate daily existence through specific televisual genres and technological means such as streaming platforms. In this way, this article sheds light on the importance of rewatching and its intrinsic link to the notion of comfort. Our analysis derives from month-long diary reports submitted by 40 Costa Rican streaming platform users, supplemented by discussions in focus groups involving 13 of these participants.

Costa Rica provides a pertinent case for examining the pursuit of ontological comfort through media practices for several reasons. First, Costa Ricans, having held the top spot in the Happy Planet Index for several years, perceive happiness as a societal imperative (Xirinachs-Salazar et al., 2023). Costa Rica has positioned happiness as a key commodity that allows it to distinguish itself on the global stage. This perspective contrasts with the internal perception of a decline in the overall quality of life. Over the past decades, the nation has transitioned from a social democratic welfare to a neo-conservative state, leading to repercussions in accessing fundamental public services like education and healthcare (Molina Jiménez & Díaz Arias, 2021).

Second, Costa Rica stands out as one of the countries with the highest per capita use of streaming platforms in Latin America (Siles, 2023; Siles, Espinoza-Rojas, et al., 2019). A 2024 survey indicated that 84% of the population uses at least one platform for entertainment purposes, including YouTube (80% of the population), Netflix (33%), Disney+ (12%), and Max (10%; Brenes Peralta et al., 2024). Finally, Costa Rica is characterized by specific sociocultural features that aid in comprehending the global patterns of content circulation in platform capitalism, owing to its history of cultural and political proximity to the US (Muñoz-González, 2023, 2025; Muñoz-González & Siles, 2025).

2. Why Do Audiences Rewatch Content?

Scholars have examined rewatching through various perspectives and analytical traditions. Focusing primarily on recent reconfigurations of the television industry, researchers in media and communication

studies have demonstrated that contemporary television is fundamentally organized around the concept of rewatchability (Kompare, 2006). From an audience studies perspective, Mittell (2015) focused on the evolution of television narratives, concluding that television has become too complex to be watched only once. For Mittell, contemporary television thus *demands* that people rewatch content to fully grasp the narrative, structural, and aesthetic complexity that shapes its narratives.

From a political economy perspective, scholars have also argued that the film and television industry promotes the unlimited repetition of different formats and narratives to perpetuate economic gain cycles (Echauri, 2023). In this view, the industry strategically promotes rewatchability as a means of capital accumulation, employing diverse tactics to encourage viewership. One such key industrial tactic is what Klein and Palmer (2016) call "multiplicities," texts such as sequels, adaptations, remakes, and imitations that deliberately reuse and capitalize on images, stories, or characters from earlier works. Multiplicities work by "volatilizing" the meaning of repeated texts, a process that "disperses critical attention across textual borders that are readily displaced or replaced by the continuing flow of texts" (Klein & Palmer, 2016, p. 3).

Few empirical studies have specifically addressed why audiences rewatch content. In the analysis of complex television mentioned above, Mittell (2015) identified the "rewatcher" as a specific kind of viewer (distinct from "fresh" and "spoiled" viewers). For Mittell, the rewatcher is not unlike the television critic who watches content by "simultaneously experiencing and analyzing media texts, foregrounding the operational aesthetic [through] a playful engagement with past experiences [that adds] another layer of viewing pleasure" (Mittell, 2015, p. 177). Rewatching thus involves a pleasurable combination of both anticipation and surprise.

By combining survey data and interviews, Bentley and Murray (2016) focused on the practical reasons that motivate audiences to rewatch content. They considered three reasons that led people to watch certain content again: social connection (rewatching provides an opportunity to connect with others who are watching or have also watched certain content); mood cultivation (rewatching offers a means to manage certain emotions); and nostalgia (rewatching allows the experience of ideas or feelings associated with a previous time or process in people's life.) For Bentley and Murray (2016), specific conditions shape these motivations: rewatching allows people to "prepare" for new seasons or sequels by having all the information necessary fresh in their mind; it is surrounded by the centrality of recommendations whether from other people or algorithms; it is involved in issues of self-performance as viewers use rewatched content to signal an aspect of their identity; and it is a way to make sense of the narrative complexity that characterizes contemporary television (as theorized by Mittell).

Finally, another analytical tradition has focused on a more philosophical dimension of rewatching, exploring its significance as a social practice. Shuster (2021) developed a phenomenological approach to contend that rewatching is grounded in predictability, which entails interaction with an actual and mediated reality. This distinction extends beyond the act of merely repeating content; instead, it is a constant pursuit of pleasure and joy. Shuster (2021) notes that at first rewatching seems to derive from a sense of powerlessness, which finds pleasure in abdication and repetition. In this logic, it is a tactic deployed to fathom the passing of time in a world that overpowers individual agency. However, Shuster then notes that rewatching also entails a form of freedom. This is because predictability provides a sense of joy linked to the prioritization of the past or future, functioning as "a sort of sundial to the present moment, revealing broader social and political conditions" (Shuster, 2021, p. 25).

3. Theorizing Rewatchability and Ontological Comfort

Building on previous studies' valuable empirical and analytical insights, this article develops the notion of *ontological comfort* as a theoretical framework to make sense of rewatching practices. References to comfort permeate public culture, appearing in contexts ranging from the language of therapy and healthcare to concerns about the climate crisis, the design of physical spaces, and economic aspirations for a particular lifestyle. As the Oxford English Dictionary summarizes it, comfort typically refers to "a state of physical and material well-being, with freedom from pain and trouble, and satisfaction of bodily need" (Comfort, n.d., par. 10).

Etymologically, "comfort" emerges from the Late Latin verb *confortō*, which is composed of the prefix *con-* (together) and *fortis* (strong), conveying the sense of strengthening a relationship or condition. This aptly expresses the deliberation involved in doing something to gain solace. Comfort thus comprises seeking predictability for the sake of "ease, well-being, and satisfaction" (Tutton & Seers, 2003, p. 690).

Comfort in everyday life has evolved from an expectation to an obligation. This shift is tied to the development of capitalism. As Maldonado (1991, p. 35) succinctly puts it, "Comfort is a modern idea. Before the Industrial Revolution, the need (or expectation) for comfort—in the sense…of convenience, ease, and habitability—was the privilege of the few." According to Maldonado (1991), comfort solidified as an "ideology" in Victorian England, particularly through its connection to social control categories such as hygiene and order. Crowley (1999) demonstrates how, in eighteenth-century Anglo-American culture, comfort then served to legitimize patterns of popular consumption by disrupting the traditional economic and moral distinction between necessity and luxury. Building on this historical development, comfort has emerged as a keyword that "helps tap into neuralgic points of contemporary cultures" (Birke & Butter, 2020, p. 8). Hickey (2023, p. 8) goes so far as to call comfort "the most pressing challenge facing human existence," as it encapsulates "what it means to live and what it will take to sustain the very possibility of life."

Recent literature in social sciences and humanities has emphasized how the obligation of comfort is largely achieved through "personal attachments with everyday devices" (Beer, 2012, p. 361), or, in other words, how comfort is derived from and through material things, most notably media technologies (Miller, 2008). This approach to comfort also has important antecedents in the literature on televisuality. In his classic work *Television and Everyday Life*, Silverstone (1994) argued that the media provide a feeling of regularity in people's lives through the reiteration of content. Drawing on psychoanalytic and sociological theories, Silverstone contended that television is fundamental in fostering a sense of "ontological security," that is, "the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (Giddens, 1990, p. 92). According to Silverstone, this sense of security is essential for maintaining the sphere of social life and generates experiences of contentment. Similarly, Radway (1984) showed that genre conventions are key in allowing audiences to know how a media narrative will unfold. The repetition of aesthetic traits satisfies an audience's taste and, simultaneously, confirms their identity within a social order.

In this article, we argue that Costa Rican streaming users engage in a quest for ontological comfort through rewatching. To this end, we differentiate security and comfort as specific ontological conditions. There is a clear relationship between security and comfort. Ontological security involves experiencing a continuous and

regular state of affairs derived from being part of a concrete and complete social reality. As Silverstone's work showed, security is about stability in social life. Etymologically, "security" comes from the Latin noun *securitas* and adjective *securus*, derived from the prefix *se-* (without) and *curus* (care). Ontological security thus involves a carefree environment since there is a general existential base for everyday life which is constant and stable. As Giddens (1990, p. 92) summarized it, security "is an emotional, rather than a cognitive, phenomenon, and it is rooted in the *unconscious*" (added emphasis). As a supplement, we contend that ontological comfort involves an active and conscious pursuit of pleasure and joy derived from stable and consistent social practices (including rewatching). In addition to the sense of stability inherent in ontological security, comfort denotes a state of well-being.

In what follows, we unpack how rewatching practices on streaming platforms fit within this broader trajectory of seeking comfort through relationships with technologies and media texts.

4. Research Design

Our study relied on two methods: daily reports of streaming platform usage and focus groups with a subset of these diarists. To construct our sample, we issued a call for participation across various university-associated profiles on social media. We selected a group of 40 individuals among those who completed an initial questionnaire to participate, prioritizing sociodemographic diversity. The final sample consisted of individuals between the ages of 20 and 50. Twenty-eight of these participants identified as women, 11 as men, and one person as non-binary. Most participants had some type of formal education. They were mostly either students or professionals in diverse fields.

Participants were asked to submit reports of their streaming platform usage over one month. Respondents detailed all content watched, including both what informants viewed for the first time and what they rewatched. In each report, participants were encouraged to comment on practical aspects (content watched, devices used, time invested, etc.), cognitive elements (explanations of platform functioning, interpretations of interfaces and algorithmic recommendations received, etc.), and affective experiences (emotional responses to the viewed content and the use of streaming platforms). Individuals could complete a brief online form or send audio messages through a messaging platform (like WhatsApp). In total, participants submitted 276 daily reports between March and May 2023.

After receiving these reports, a subset of 13 individuals was selected for the focus groups. We aimed for a representative sample in terms of age and occupation diversity. We conducted four focus groups in June 2023 (two in person and two via Zoom). In these conversations, we delved into the findings from the daily reports and addressed topics such as the most-viewed content during the study (both first-time views and rewatched content), their thoughts on the platforms used, and the role of these platforms in their everyday lives. Focus groups lasted between 56 and 94 minutes (with an average of 79 minutes).

We analyzed data from the diaries and focus groups inductively. We conducted three rounds of coding following grounded theory procedures. In the initial round, we identified numerous categories in our informants' responses, including rewatching. The second round specifically focused on rewatching, seeking to understand the meanings participants attributed to this practice. The third coding round expanded the data analysis into four major categories that provided thematic coherence to the discussion: (a) motivations

for streaming platform use; (b) the pleasure derived from using these platforms; (c) the type of content viewed to seek ontological comfort; and (d) aspects of temporality within the process. In what follows, we develop these four categories further.

5. Rewatching and Ontological Comfort in Costa Rica

Our findings significantly validate the underlying practical motivations for rewatching as identified in earlier studies (Bentley & Murray, 2016; Mittell, 2015). Both in their diary reports and focus group conversations, our interlocutors indicated rewatching certain series or films as these provided them with opportunities to connect with others, cultivate feelings and emotions, reconnect with certain moments or past processes in their lives, get ready for a new season, perform their identities about their fandom, and discover elements individuals had not necessarily noticed the first time they watched them. To supplement extant research, in what follows we focus instead on the case of rewatching as an active pursuit of ontological comfort.

5.1. Streaming to "De-Stress"

In order to better comprehend the significance of rewatching, we examine first the broader motivations that initially attracted individuals to use streaming platforms. Virtually all of our interviewees expressed dedicating substantial daily time to consuming content across various platforms, most notably Max (HBO Max at the time of the study; 40% of participants mentioned in their diaries having watched it at least once at some point during the study) and Netflix (37.5%). Participants also reported having watched Disney+ (25% of participants), Amazon Prime Video (17.5%), Star+ (15%), Apple TV (12.5%), and Crunchyroll (12.5%). Netflix was the most frequently mentioned platform in these diaries: it appeared in 26% of reports, followed by Max (18% of reports).

Participants in our study were straightforward in what made watching content so compelling: it offered a means to "disconnect" from the stress associated with their everyday lives. The words of Clara (a 40-year-old supervisor) are representative of this sentiment: "[Watching content on streaming platforms] is my refuge after I leave work because it relaxes me." Clara's use of the term "refuge" implies a sense of protection from a threat, danger, or risk. During a focus group, Giselle (a 26-year-old university student) echoed these words: "[I watch content] because it provides quietness. I like to focus on other stories and avoid my own." Thus, Giselle openly suggests that the stories portrayed in the series and films she watches offer her an escape from the reality of her own life.

Using their terms, streaming offered diarists valuable opportunities to "de-stress" and "disconnect" because of its self-schedule affordances, that is, because platforms allowed them to watch content whenever and wherever they pleased (Lüders & Sundet, 2022). According to Martina (a 50-year-old IT project manager):

> I look for things that really disconnect me from daily stress. I consume [platforms] a lot at night when I have finished everything else. It is a way to not think about the routine anymore. I watch [content] that is familiar to me and that I know is going to disconnect me and relax me. That is why I watched *Modern Family* the most [during the study]. I like it because it is entertaining, it clears my mind.

For Martina, rewatching *Modern Family* at the end of the day felt like a reward for having endured the stress of everyday life. To achieve this goal, Martina expressed a preference for a certain type of content: what was "familiar" to her. In this sense, for interviewees like Martina, rewatching provides a secure sense of comfort against the stress derived from daily obligations and pressures. Rewatching was thus a deliberate and purposeful activity, tailored to each individual's everyday life and schedule.

The tendency to envision streaming platforms as a content "archive" for daily disconnection was a common theme among our informants (Lüders, 2021). For example, Giselle prepared for the reboot of *Sex and the City* by watching its first six seasons during the month of our study. Her engagement with the streaming service Max was thus shaped by the satisfaction of knowing she had access to a complete and permanent archive of the series on the platform, available whenever she chose to watch.

Silverstone's notion of ontological security helps to make sense of the use of streaming platforms to find a "refuge," through a content archive, to disconnect from daily stress. However, a more detailed analysis is required of the active and deliberate efforts of people to obtain a sense of pleasure through predictability. This search for pleasure through rewatching is the focus of Section 5.2.

5.2. The Pleasure of Rewatching

Selecting what to watch often involves uncertainty as viewers can't anticipate the results of an unknown series or film. Miguel, who is 35 and works as a lab assistant, eloquently expressed why he preferred to rewatch content to deal with this uncertainty: "If I'm going to sit down and watch something, I'll go to my comfort zone. If it's something new, it stresses me out." For Miguel, streaming platforms operate as a secure space where he can "disconnect." In this space, the familiar provides a sense of comfort that helps him overcome the distress of not knowing what to expect from an unseen series or film. Martina, who we cited above, expressed a similar sentiment: "I usually repeat the series that I like because I'm going for something *safe* and *good*" (emphasis added). For both Miguel and Martina, rewatching is thus a secure way to daily comfort that has been previously tested and experienced.

Mittell's (2015) notion of the rewatcher as a distinct kind of television viewer aptly highlights the differences between rewatching and experiencing narrative elements without knowing what to expect. In other words, rewatching provides a *specific* kind of comfort. When asked to explain what made rewatching his main way of engaging with streaming platforms, Miguel asserted: "It generates emotion in me to remember when I watched something at one time, or something I had to wait a whole week for it to happen." For Miguel, rewatching evoked a cascade of emotions layered atop each other: it was exciting for him to rewatch something, reminiscing about the initial anticipation it had stirred. Through rewatching, he aimed to relax in the present by reliving what had excited him in the past.

The comfort of rewatching lies partly in the specific combination of anticipation and surprise. This combination is a fundamental component of the pleasure that rewatching provides to our interlocutors. Miguel articulated the importance of anticipation in his use of streaming platforms this way: "I normally use HBO [Max] to rewatch things. I'm a big fan of *Game of Thrones*, I've watched it like 1,000 times. I love certain scenes and [when I watch them] I'm almost reciting them from memory." Miguel also stressed the importance of streaming service Max's self-schedule affordances as one of the reasons he subscribed to the platform. He found comfort (and

a means of self-identifying himself as a big fan of *Game of Thrones*) in his capacity to predict the lines of his favorite scenes.

However, anticipation was just one aspect of the rewatching experience. Another component involved willingly embracing surprise, even if individuals were already expecting it. In her second diary report, Valentina (who is 28 years old and administers a property on Airbnb) captured this feeling of orchestrated surprise by referring to the series *Lucifer*, which she was watching for the second time: "I'm watching it for comfort, I've already watched it….[It makes me] laugh! And surprises me (even though I already knew what was happening)." Valentina explicitly found comfort in both knowing what to expect in the series' plot while being surprised by not recalling the specific details of how the events unfolded. In this case, the comfort lies in the reassurance of knowing the narrative outcome without precisely remembering the journey. Valentina thus actively places herself in a position to be surprised.

On many occasions, rewatching provided comfort not to the broad vicissitudes of everyday life but to the specific emotions of the day. Our interlocutors referred to these occasions as a matter of dealing with or cultivating "moods" (cf. Siles, Segura-Castillo, et al., 2019), thus pointing to the fleeting nature of the emotions that needed to be addressed through rewatching. During a focus group conversation, Francesca (a 43-year-old psychologist) explained how she selected what to watch on any given day:

> It all depends on how I feel that day. Sometimes I remember a movie and say to myself: "I'd love to watch it again!" Or maybe I'm nostalgic. Or I may remember a part of the movie and not everything else, so I rewatch it.

In her third diary report, she noted she had opted to rewatch something because she didn't want to feel lonely while doing other domestic activities. In her words: "I watched it while I was cleaning the house. It makes me feel like I'm not alone." Knowing the series relatively well allowed her to divide her attention between the screen and household chores. A wide variety of emotional states thus guided Francesca's content selections: from the emotional state of nostalgia (Grainge, 2000; Muñoz-González, 2025) to the specific moods experienced on any given day (including the sense of loneliness). As with other interlocutors, Francesca believes that rewatching series offers a consistent source of comfort, allowing for the exploration of a wide range of emotions.

Like Francesca, many of our interlocutors found solace in the sense of companionship that television has historically provided. Rewatching deepens this comfort by allowing viewers to engage with a story without the need for full attention, as they already know what will happen. The use of mobile devices further enhances this experience, blending companionship and comfort, as captured in Mónica's (34 years old) words:

> I take my phone to the bathroom and place it here while hanging up laundry. The series follows me wherever I go in the house. That way, I can watch an entire series or several movies in a single day.

Mónica's account places herself at the heart of the action: She moves through her house, with the series "following" her on her mobile phone, offering constant and instant comfort.

Unlike ontological security, comfort is not an unconscious state but rather a deliberate pursuit. Our interlocutors discovered solace and peace in what was familiar to them. Moreover, they navigated the

details of everyday life by consciously fostering the right moods that would contribute to their well-being. In short, ontological comfort is derived from predictability—be it orchestrated surprises—and specific efforts to nurture the moods in which it can thrive.

5.3. A Universe of Rewatchable Genres

According to Shuster (2021), genres are key to rewatching as they "suggest a kind of epistemological fingernail into the world" (p. 24). As an interpretive contract, genres and their conventions provide expectations that lead to a sense of predictability and orchestrated surprise underlying ontological comfort.

Genre expectations were also central to our participants' decisions on what to rewatch. Martina, for example, explained her selections during the study in this manner: "I had already watched [*Modern Family*] twice, but I had just finished watching *The Office* and thus repeated *Modern Family* because it is in the same vein." Martina characterized rewatchable content by referring to an implicitly shared set of common characteristics that she labeled "the same vein." As with most of our interlocutors, the predictability created by genre conventions was much more important for Martina than other criteria when deciding what to rewatch, including algorithms or platform affordances.

As Martina's words suggest, although participants mentioned they could rewatch any kind of series or film, they also revealed a preference for specific types of content. In her third diary report, a 20-year-old university student named Susana felt the need to clarify why she was rewatching the series *Arrested Development* and *Gilmore Girls*: "I like that I've watched both series before so I don't need to invest a lot of time/attention/commitment/emotional burden." Although short, Susana's list groups a complex set of requirements that the content should meet to be suitable for rewatching: neither too emotionally demanding nor too cognitively challenging.

Interlocutors tended to employ one specific term to refer to the series or films that met this mix of criteria: They enjoyed rewatching "light" content (a term originally used by participants in English). In everyday language, Costa Ricans often use the term "light" to express the qualities of something that can be either superficial or healthy. In the context of televisual content, "light" means "not something silly but rather easy to process" both emotionally and cognitively, as Valentina put it in one focus group. In terms of traditional genre categories, rewatchable "light" content involved a certain dose of comedy or comedy-inflected material. Comedies are "light" in that they are interpreted as accessible for most people and their characters deal with what seem to be relatively trivial situations (which helps avoid "one's own stories," as Giselle's quote above expressed it). This expectation was strictly tied to the way participants felt that comedy's genre conventions could securely allow them to disconnect from everyday life and find comfort. In Mónica's words: "For me, it is important to have comedy among all the series I watch because it lifts my mood and takes away the stress of work."

When participants mentioned their appreciation for "light" material and comedies, they were primarily referring to content produced in the US. The comfort of rewatching thus came from the genre conventions provided by people in comedic situations as defined by the US television industry. For example, in *Modern Family*, our interlocutors found appealing the recurring set of characters and events and situations that are usually resolved within single episodes. Similarly, participants rewatched *The Office* because they enjoyed its

particular sense of humor and felt an affective connection with its characters. Other "light" series that participants mentioned included *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *How I Met Your Mother*.

To be sure, comfort doesn't necessarily imply passive reception or uncritical acceptance. Instead, Muñoz-González (2023) refers to Costa Ricans' relation to transnational content as "critical resignation," a reflexive interpretative operation based on both appreciation of and resistance to American culture. Seen in this way, the comfort of rewatching partly consists of engaging in a critical operation where Costa Ricans both relate to the ordinary situations from American life reflected on the screen while sustaining a critical awareness of their differences and political significance.

The geographic origin of the content viewed was a recurring topic of reflection in both the diaries and focus groups. Valentina, the Airbnb administrator, articulated the notion of critical resignation most compellingly during our focus group discussion: "I've definitely fallen into the sin of consuming Americanized [*agringado*] content, especially with series. I do enjoy watching other kinds of content, but I don't have the time [to explore]." For Valentina, watching "Americanized" content is a pragmatic choice, saving her the time required to navigate the unfamiliar generic conventions of other television industries. Valentina also acknowledged that watching series in English helps her improve her language skills, which she considers essential for her work as an Airbnb property manager. To support this professional goal, Valentina, like many others, ensures that subtitles are set to the original English.

When asked why she described this as a "sin," Valentina expanded on her perception of television consumption as an ideological practice:

> It's not the same to watch an American series as it is to watch one produced in a Latin American country, which might even feel more relatable. [It's a sin] because I'm contributing to the idea that here [in Costa Rica], we're heavily influenced by US culture. Americans are evil! I'm sorry [to say this]! But it's interesting because some of their own series show just how messed up they are and the problems they face.

Thus, Valentina's critical resignation is both practical and political: She acknowledges that the US television industry itself offers material to support her critique, elevating her resignation into a deliberate and reflective engagement with American culture.

As noted previously, our interlocutors often preferred to rewatch something rather than venturing into the uncertain territory of discovering new series or films because of the comfort rewatching provides. However, occasionally, some relied on the genre expectations of content they had rewatched to try something new. That was Susana's case, the university student, who stated during a focus group:

> I almost always watch things I've already watched. I'm too lazy to start new things. During this month [the period of our study], maybe I started new series because they were a continuation of other series [I have watched]. Like *Queen Charlotte* [is a continuation] of *Bridgerton*, which I had already watched….They're from the same universe.

Susana's expectations came from the fact that new series were "multiplicities" based on the previous series she had rewatched (Klein & Palmer, 2016). Her expectations that the new series would help her "disconnect" from

everyday life stress were based on genre conventions, that is, they belonged to the same symbolic "universe." However, these expectations failed to materialize. According to Susana: "I didn't finish [it] because [it was] kind of bad." This confirmed to her that rewatching something was a more secure way to obtain comfort than trying something new.

Our interlocutors' relationship with "old" and "new" media was complex. Their decision of what to rewatch is not necessarily based on when a series or film was released. Instead, this content must satisfy certain criteria to become rewatchable. The textual properties examined above were the entry point upon which participants started to develop rewatching as a fundamental practice in their everyday lives.

5.4. Rewatching Time and Time for Rewatching

Temporality offers another key dimension to further understand the relationships between rewatching and comfort. In the most obvious sense, rewatching is predicated on temporality as it is based on the recurrence of a practice over time. In short, rewatching is a quest for comfort time and time again, a pursuit that recurs due to the repetitive nature of everyday life within capitalist societies.

Rewatching is a temporal practice also in that it is typically carried out at certain moments of the day. As noted earlier, for some, comfort lies in the ability that platforms (as permanent "archives" of content) and mobile devices provide to rewatch things throughout the day, offering a sense of constant companionship. For others, as suggested by Martina's quote in Section 5.1, rewatching was a reward expected at the end of the day, meant to soothe the stress of everyday life.

In addition to being a temporally situated practice, rewatching has its specific temporality. Susana's intervention during a focus group made this process evident. She explained:

> *Gilmore Girls* is always in my queue on Netflix and, when I don't know what to watch, I just put on *Gilmore Girls*. I rarely watch new things. Whenever I open it, I feel like I don't explore [Netflix's interface] as much because I always go to what I already know I'm watching.

Susana's words emphasize how both watching content and deciding what to watch takes time. For Susana, rewatching is best understood as an automatic process that allows viewers to regulate and maximize time. In short, rewatching is a safe *space* also because it offers an assurance that no time is "wasted." In Susana's account, rewatching is also endowed with specific temporal dynamics: Rewatching is a loop that "synchronizes" the pursuit of comfort. This synchronicity, achieved through a rewatching loop each time she uses streaming platforms, allowed Susana to understand her capacity to act (that is, her agency) in opposition to the actions she feels Netflix would like to impose on her: always watch its new "original" series, explore its catalog, navigate rows of genres, or pay attention to algorithmic recommendations (Siles, 2023).

Susana's example brings into focus the links between time and space in rewatching. During focus groups, our interlocutors highlighted how some spaces (including bedrooms, kitchens, living rooms, and even the bus while commuting) were tied to the deliberate action of rewatching. Simultaneously, rewatching rendered manageable the size of streaming platforms' catalogs, thus creating a material and symbolic "comfort zone" in everyday life.

6. Conclusion

This article has developed the notion of ontological comfort as the sense of well-being arising from rewatching series and films. We have argued that rewatching constitutes an intentional pursuit of stability, predictability, orchestrated surprise, and a conscious understanding of one's capability to navigate everyday existence, through specific televisual genres (such as "light" content) and certain technological means (notably the self-schedule and "archival" affordances of streaming platforms). In dissecting the dynamics of rewatching, our intention is not to suggest that individuals do not watch new content altogether. Our interlocutors also found pleasure in discovering fresh series or films, typically in specific circumstances and with particular companions. Instead, we have sought to demonstrate that rewatching is not an exception but rather the cornerstone of many individuals' relationships with televisuality in everyday life.

By differentiating ontological comfort from ontological security, we have added nuance to the study of the relationship that contemporary audiences have not only with the media but with society at large. This distinction helps us understand a dialectic between the more immediate instances of social reality and its more abstract and structural conditions. In rewatching, people actively seek to make their quotidian spheres more manageable and predictable (that is, comfortable) while also maintaining a broader sense of security that results from "an active engagement in the world, an active engagement in the events and patterns and relationships of everyday life" (Silverstone, 1994, pp. 5–6).

At its core, when Costa Rican streaming platform users and audiences rewatch specific content, they seek to make sense of a world that is not entirely theirs. Searching for ontological comfort is a response to the pressures and duties of everyday life, from household chores to work-related activities. As Morley (1992) noted more than three decades ago, audiences participate in unequal power relations that make them vulnerable on many fronts. A key example of this power struggle comes from Costa Ricans' relationship with televisual content produced in the US. As we demonstrated, the references through which our interlocutors made sense of the structural conditions in everyday life (from the stresses of "the office" to the tensions of the "modern family") came primarily from such genres as American comedies. Nevertheless, it was *through* their critical engagement with this kind of content, both appreciating and resisting it, that participants built notions of self-worth and purpose in their everyday activities (Muñoz-González, 2023, 2025). Thus, by rewatching, our interlocutors developed a sense of agency over their lives that, although limited, gave them comfort to wake up every day and deal with a capitalist society that is not a creation of their own. At the same time, this critical resignation underscores how comfort has transformed from a possibility into an obligation in contemporary life.

In popular culture, streaming platforms are typically portrayed as gateways to infinite content. And, for many, they certainly serve this purpose. However, they also signify the opposite: a portal to the finite and the restricted of what has already been watched, sometimes even before the rise of streaming technologies. From this perspective, "streaming cultures" scholarship could be overemphasizing the importance of algorithms, interfaces, and technological features in the contemporary experience of televisuality. Most of our participants appreciated streaming not primarily for the accuracy of algorithmic suggestions or the vastness of content catalogs, although they occasionally found value in both. Rather, they embraced streaming technologies mostly for their capacity to seamlessly integrate rewatching into the nuances of everyday life and facilitate the cultivation of specific emotions that contributed to their overall well-being in a society that demands them to be the "happiest" nation in the world.

As Kompare (2006, p. 198) noted in his analysis of repetition in American television, "New technologies, business models, regulatory structures, programming forms, and modes of viewing increasingly mesh with the old, with widely varying, and often unpredictable results." Consistent with this observation, our analysis revealed a dimension of streaming technologies that is often overlooked by the emphasis on content novelty and discovery, namely how streaming can also work to extend long-standing practices of televisual audiences (such as rewatching) and contribute to consolidating enduring aspects of televisuality (such as the centrality of repetition in the production, distribution, and consumption of content; Caldwell, 1995).

The pursuit of ontological comfort is not confined exclusively to rewatching or the use of streaming platforms. New research could further explore other ways in which individuals exert their agency concerning how they experience their lives with technological means in ways that are consistent with this search for ontological comfort (Siles, Gómez-Cruz, & Ricaurte, 2024). In this regard, extending the study to include larger and more diverse samples could provide a deeper understanding of the significance of rewatching practices in relation to other cultural practices and platforms. Our findings also differ from studies that tend to view platform usage as a site of oppression for individuals, as we prioritize how people find pleasure and joy in their ambivalent relationship with technology. Scholars have observed social media users employing platforms such as TikTok also for escapism and pleasure (Schellewald, 2024; Siles, Valerio-Alfaro, & Meléndez-Moran, 2024). Thus, further research could shed light on how the pursuit of ontological comfort shapes the use of other platforms, including social media. It would also be valuable to examine the tension between the quest for comfort and the exertion of power by technology companies through these platforms.

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Conflict of Interests

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About the Authors

Ignacio Siles is a professor of media and technology studies in the School of Communication and a researcher in the Centro de Investigación en Comunicación (CICOM) at the University of Costa Rica, Costa Rica. He is the author of *Living with Algorithms: Agency and User Culture in Costa Rica* (MIT Press, 2023); *A Transnational History of the Internet in Central America: Networks, Integration and Development* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); and *Networked Selves: Trajectories of Blogging in the United States and France* (Peter Lang, 2017), among other works.

Rodrigo Muñoz-González is a lecturer at the School of Communication of the University of Costa Rica, Costa Rica. He holds a PhD in media and communications from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). His main research areas are audience studies, sociology of communication, discourse theory, and cultural studies. He is the author of *Young People, Media, and Nostalgia* (Routledge, 2025).

Luciana Valerio-Alfaro is a student in the School of Communication at the University of Costa Rica. She has published in journals such as the *International Journal of Communication*, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *New Media & Society*.

Vanessa Valiati is an assistant professor and researcher at the postgraduate program in Creative Industries, Department of Communication and Media Studies at Feevale University, Brazil. Her research focuses on media studies, entertainment, digital platforms, and cultural production. She leads the project Music and Platformization: The Algorithmic Mediation of Taste and Streaming Consumption Practices.

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ARTICLE

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Datacasting: TikTok's Algorithmic Flow as Televisual Experience

Ellenrose Firth and Alberto Marinelli

Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

Correspondence: Ellenrose Firth (ellenrose.firth@uniroma1.it)

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Abstract

Recommendation algorithms have acquired a central role in the suggestion of content within both subscription video on demand (SVOD) and advertising-based video on demand (AVOD) services and media-sharing platforms. In this article, we suggest the introduction of the datacasting paradigm, which takes into account the increasing relevance algorithms have in selection processes on audiovisual platforms. We use TikTok as a case study as it is an entirely algorithmic platform, and therefore embodies the heart of our discussion, and analyse how the algorithmic flow within the platform influences user experience, the impact it has on the enjoyment of content, and whether the platform can be considered televisual. We have opted to frame TikTok within debates on flow, as we believe that is what is at the core of the platform experience. Through the analysis of in-depth interviews, we extracted two main categories of responses: TV on TikTok and TikTok as TV. The former includes all responses related to the consumption of traditional televisual material on the platform, while the latter looks at all potential connections between the platform and television viewing habits.

Keywords

algorithmic flow; datacasting; media-sharing platforms; on-demand platforms; televisuality; TikTok

1. Television Flow: From Schedules to Algorithms

Watching television has always been a mutable experience: From early-day changes, with the introduction of remote controls and multiple channels (Uricchio, 2004), to the modern-day introduction of on-demand content, spectators have found different ways to enjoy and engage with audiovisual content. It is now widely accepted that streaming services are part of what are considered to be experiences of traditional television, and linear television has continued to thrive thanks to broadcasting practices that ensure engaging lean-back

experiences for its audience. Alongside this scenario, media-sharing platforms contribute to the development of new forms of audiovisual content, hosting increasingly televisual (Caldwell, 1995) videos which are inserted in personalised flows of content.

Our aim is to understand if the televisual framework can be applied beyond traditional television, and to explore the transformations of flow experiences in an age in which asynchronous, individualised experiences are at the core of most content-based platforms. We will do this by analysing existing theory within television studies, looking at flow theories and the evolution of viewing experiences, including the impact that recommendation algorithms have had on contemporary consumption habits, and then focusing on TikTok, as we believe it is the platform that best encapsulates the impact that an algorithmic flow has on viewing habits.

Flow (Wiliams, 2004) has long been considered *televisual essence* (Uricchio, 2004), and is seen as one of the defining characteristics of the medium. Although the medium has undergone numerous changes, modifying what flow was originally conceived to be—a continuous flow of content selected by a broadcaster—the concept persists. Uricchio, in 2004, noted how disruptions to the medium, such as increased choice and interaction, "[signal] a shift away from the programming-based notion of flow that Williams documented, to a viewer-centered notion" (Uricchio, 2004, p. 239), and followed that by stating:

> The overarching trend from the early 1950s to the present seems clear: from television as a one-way, coherent, programmer-controlled flow to television as bidirectional, fragmented, user-controlled experience; from mass audiences to atomized viewers; from a site of public memorialization to an increasingly personal site of private and public expression. (Uricchio, 2009, p. 36)

These observations capture the main changes within traditional television, emphasising the shift from a collective experience guided by a top-down force with editorial control, towards an individualised experience dictated by personal taste and recommended content.

During the broadcast era, television was a medium to be enjoyed collectively, operating as a cultural institution, communicating to large audiences key values within society (cf. Lotz, 2014, p. 37); in the multi-channel era it partially lost its identity as a mass medium, with channels targeted towards increasingly specific niches, and consequently the narrowcasting paradigm was introduced (Mullen, 2002). According to Lotz, television lost its ability to stimulate watercooler conversations (2014, p. 27) when viewers started to be able to select their own programming, leading to more and more individual experiences and the acquisition of a stronger sense of agency: Although in narrowcasting viewers are still exposed to a linear flow of content, it is within their power to select what channel to watch, i.e., what flow to enter. Alongside this, the VCR (video cassette recorder) allowed people to enjoy audiovisual products beyond scheduled times, giving them an opportunity to view *time-shifted* content.

Turning TV flow into "a set of choices and actions initiated by the viewer" (Uricchio, 2004, p. 242) greatly disrupts its initial conception, as there is no longer the possibility to guarantee the organised sequence of programmes and advertisements that Williams had described in his initial analysis. With the convergence of broadcast and broadband technologies, multiple devices have developed the capacity to host audiovisual content, and "television has faced significant competition to its dominant sociocultural position as the

primary medium for delivering video content" (Johnson, 2019, pp. 6–7). This, alongside the development of over-the-top television, contributed to the transformation of the medium into an online medium. Scholarly attention has focused on the rise of Netflix (Jenner, 2016, 2018; Lobato, 2018, 2019; Strangelove, 2015) as it is a service within which it is possible to fully observe the transformations that on-demand television has brought to viewing experiences.

It is undeniable that on a service like Netflix one cannot experience linear flow, however flow can be redefined. Cox, when talking about the service, suggests the following:

> Self-selection and user interactivity within digital platforms are not necessarily a break or departure from the flow series; rather, they suggest a contemporary and active form of "switching on" to the flow series, one that may induce users (as with broadcast television) to remain within their personalized flow given its highly individualized lure. (Cox, 2018, p. 444)

By labelling this type of flow as *on-demand flow* it becomes possible to describe the most commonly widespread model of content distribution and consumption in the contemporary media ecosystem. In the era of personcasting, flow loses its linearity, and the collective experience mostly disappears, leading to highly individualised experiences. If, as highlighted by Lotz, in the narrowcasting era it had already become difficult to find common topics for watercooler conversations, at this stage it seems to be almost impossible; users' sense of agency, then, manifests itself not only in the content they select, but in the social TV practices they enact within online spaces (Andò & Marinelli, 2018).

On-demand flow is reminiscent of what van Dijck (2013) called "staccato flow" when referring to "the self-selected short videos sequenced by user's clicks" (p. 152) on YouTube. Just as TV broadcasters were "eager to capture viewer's attention by programming a 'flow of content'…video-sharing sites are keen to keep their users glued to the screen" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 152), and by organising the platform in such a way that it encourages users to compose their own flow, YouTube contributes to the creation of a continuous flow, although it appears disconnected (cf. Pietrobruno, 2018, p. 527). This definition is accompanied by the idea of "homecasting," which refers to the role content creators play in a platform like YouTube: Here, they are the ones who make content available, be it professionally produced (with the help of production companies or agencies) or created at amateur level. On YouTube, and on all personalised streaming services, it is possible to partially experience what we are referring to as *datacasting*: Content flow is structured based on data collected by the platform or service through user interaction with the interface.

According to van Dijck, YouTube acted as a pioneer in the world of online streaming, and this innovation, alongside its ability to generate networks, and the opportunity given to users to upload videos, contributed to its popularisation (cf. van Dijck, 2013, p. 112). Video-sharing, which was at the heart of YouTube, soon morphed into video-watching (cf. van Dijck, 2013, p. 115), as people began to spend more and more time watching videos rather than making their own or sharing them. This practice was then extended to other media-sharing platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, that quickly started implementing video formats in their offer. By simplifying the recommendation process by implementing automated algorithmic feeds, social media platforms such as the aforementioned have managed to attract more and more viewers throughout the years, with a study conducted by Deloitte in 2023 confirming that people belonging to Generation Z (1997–2009) have started preferring video content available on social media to traditional television (Westcott

et al., 2023). One of the hypothesised reasons is the ease with which it is possible to find enjoyable content on social media, compared to the choice overload (cf. Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015, p. 2) faced by users on traditional subscription video on demand (SVOD) services.

As we have seen, personalisation is at the centre of contemporary flow experiences, in that most platforms and services that currently offer audiovisual content are algorithm-based. What this entails is that home pages within streaming services are built according to users' algorithmic identities (Cheney-Lippold, 2011), and that these services act as gatekeepers, only showing subscribers the content they deem appropriate (Van Esler, 2021). In analysing SVOD platforms, Cox highlighted the importance of focusing on two distinct aspects of the services: *televisible* elements, which refer to visual elements within the interface, and *invisual* elements, algorithms, and softwares that influence the way in which users interact with the service (2018). The former become fundamental in shaping user experience on the platform: As highlighted by Johnson (2019), SVOD services provide users with (seemingly) infinite rows of content, which provide the feeling of choosing from an ample catalogue, although the platform algorithms are merely offering "more of the same" (Lüders & Shanke Sundet, 2022). The latter, on the other hand, are one of the key components of datacasting experiences, in that they are crucial in ensuring that the personalisation that services enact is effective. In 2009, Andrejevic had imagined what the future of television would look like, and he had hypothesised that "the paradigm shift [will be] from user-controlled surfing to algorithm-controlled sorting (or some combination of the two)" (2009, p. 36); this is not to say that users do not (partly) retain the agency they gained when the paradigm shifted from broad/narrowcasting to personcasting, as they can still make the decision to switch on to the flow, but most interactions nowadays are shaped by platform affordances, which in turn are determined by the complete datafication of user–platform interactions.

Van Es (2023) argues that because Netflix is so dependent on user data to personalise viewing experiences it should be defined as a "data-driven organization," rather than a platform or a media company. The extremely specific categorisation of content into altgenres (Pajkovic, 2022) should lead users towards easier and more enjoyable consumption experiences, although it is not uncommon for viewers to experience decision fatigue when trying to select what to watch (Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015). The televisible elements of the platform, such as the order in which products are organised, the thumbnails that are chosen, and the seemingly infinite catalogue displayed through endless rows of content, give the "appearance of an abundance of content in which users have control over what, when and how to watch" (Johnson, 2019, p. 118).

The agency that viewers have gained throughout the evolution of television impacts their experience of SVOD services, and their interaction with platform affordances influences the invisual elements, which in turn influence what is made to be televisible. Johnson highlights how personalisation, on the one hand, can produce within users the positive feeling of *being known* by the platforms they use, but on the other, will contribute to the creation of feedback loops, partially hiding catalogues and only showing content that will appeal to the spectator (2019). Moreover, she analyses the role that recommendation algorithms play in distribution platforms, assigning to them a role that is similar to that of editorial control:

> Data and algorithms are being used to inform decisions about what content gets produced, licensed and renewed (traditionally the preserve of commissioners), what content and which viewers are commercially valuable to advertisers (traditionally determined by media buyers) and what content viewers see (traditionally shaped by schedulers). (Johnson, 2019, p. 149)

It is possible, then, to create a datacasting model (Table 1), which includes both SVOD platforms that function with an on-demand system, and media-sharing platforms that have continuous flows of content which are entirely algorithmically selected.

Table 1. Different paradigms for audiovisual content distribution.

Broadcasting/Narrowcasting	Personcasting	Datacasting
Top-down flow	Switching on to the flow	Switching on to the flow
Linear Flow	On-demand flow	On-demand flow/algorithmic flow
Content selected by a broadcaster	Content (apparently) selected by users	Content selected by an algorithm
Linear TV	YouTube, Netflix, Disney+, etc.	SVOD/TikTok, Reels, Shorts, etc.

2. TikTok as a Televisual Platform

We have chosen to focus on media-sharing platforms, specifically TikTok, to fully exemplify datacasting, as we believe they are (currently) the ones that best embody the model. TikTok has had an incredible growth in the last five years, reaching one billion users in 2024, and managing to compete and influence platforms that precede it. Scholars have attempted to define TikTok by comparing it to existing platforms: Bhandari and Bimo (2022), for example, place it at the intersection between social network sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007), such as Facebook, microblogging websites, such as X, and content community platforms, such as Instagram and YouTube. This rings true: On the one hand, TikTok allows users to create profiles, follow other users, and share content; on the other, it encourages users to interact with the content that is most relevant to them in order to personalise their For You pages; finally, it is a platform that is video-based and promotes the creation of communities surrounding content niches.

We believe the best way to frame TikTok is as a *platform that generates televisual experiences*. Uricchio, in 2009, pinpointed three specific criteria that in his opinion were fundamental in defining television: The first one was the medium's capacity to generate liveness, defined as the ability to broadcast live programming; the second characteristic was to possess flow, defined as a linear sequence of programmes; and the third was the capacity to aggregate audiences (Uricchio, 2009). While it is true that in the last two decades television has greatly evolved, and Uricchio's definition may no longer be what we think of when imagining what television is, the elements he described are still present in traditional linear television, and TikTok matches all three criteria. Although it is not the platform's main purpose, it is possible to watch live content on TikTok, shared by amateur users, content creators, and even professional profiles such as brands or TV networks; there definitely is a flow experience on TikTok, which we have called algorithmic flow, which is eerily similar to linear flow—both offer a continuous flow of content which is occasionally interrupted by advertisements, the main difference being who owns the content. As we have seen, in algorithmic platforms the editorial control is in the hands of the algorithm, whereas in linear television it is in the hands of broadcasters, who select programmes and advertisements, designing the perfect evening of television.

Finally, TikTok has the ability to aggregate publics that are otherwise geographically dispersed: Through the extremely precise segmentation that is enacted within the platform, users are placed in hyper-specific niches to which they develop a sense of belonging (Jones, 2023). Users of the platform imagine themselves as part

of an algorithmically constituted audience (Fisher & Mehozay, 2019; Shapiro, 2020), and enact strategies to ensure they do not leave the niche (or niches) they feel they belong to (Firth & Parisi, 2023), as they do not wish to be misread by the platform algorithm, which would then lead them to put in place forms of algorithmic resistance (Karizat et al., 2021). Audiences develop a strong attachment to the type of content they are shown (Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021), as well as the feeling that the platform understands them.

Faltesek et al. (2023) agree in defining TikTok as television. They add that "when we say that TikTok is television we mean that it is the form of television that is not an on-demand feature film, but the cultural and technical form flow media for which you do not have full control" (p. 11), highlighting the importance of flow in assigning televisual labels to platforms that produce content other than traditional TV. TikTok's affordances encourage users to remain within their algorithmic flow of content, interacting with the videos in order to construct accurate algorithmic identities (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). Although the content offered by content creators on the platform is not always professionally generated—rather there is a large number of amateur videos that reach viral status—the viewing experience can be defined as televisual. We define algorithmic flow as a continuous flow of content selected by recommendation algorithms based on user data they have collected through datafication processes.

From a content-based perspective, more and more production companies are investing in TikTok to share their new shows: In 2022, Kareem Rahma, an Egyptian-American comedian, created the show *Keep the Meter Running*, an unscripted series comprised of six-minute episodes in which Rahma gets into a cab in New York, asks the driver to take him to their favourite place, and to keep the meter running (Desta, 2022); the short episodes are split into four parts, in order to appeal to an audience that is used to consuming bite-sized content. Because TikTok is an algorithm-based platform, creators and producers cannot count on users following their profiles and tuning into scheduled appointments to watch new episodes: It is very important for professionally produced videos to blend into an ordinary For You page, matching the style of grassroots productions. This entails a specific kind of storytelling be associated with TikTok shows: Because producers cannot assume that their audience will be watching chronologically, every clip must have a self-contained narrative that allows viewers to enjoy each video without missing out on an ongoing story.

Furthermore, networks (such as Paramount and Peacock) and SVOD services (such as Netflix) have started sharing clips from the shows that they own on their proprietary profiles, emulating users who started this practice, by taking advantage of the lack of regulation on TikTok. By replicating a type of content made popular by "common users," networks have been able to slip under the radar and contribute to the trend. Although clips from products such as the aforementioned are not exclusively part of TikTok's platform vernacular (Gibbs et al., 2014), they are one of the main genres that are now part of the platform, and have a positive impact on the consumption of the products outside of the platform (Yang et al., 2024).

The idea behind enjoyable content-watching experiences on TikTok is that the content reaches users without them having to search for it, and that it matches their expectations of what they intend to watch at that moment. The seemingly magical match between what users desire and what the platform offers has been dubbed algorithmic conspirituality, defined as "spiritualizing beliefs about algorithms, which emerge from occasions when people find personal, often revelatory connections to content algorithmically recommended to them" (Cotter et al., 2022). Although finding clips from TV shows might not be revelatory to those who watch them, there is an element of satisfaction that can be gathered from being shown clips that one enjoys.

For this reason, it is important that networks that want to insert themselves in user practices do it by following the implicit rules developed by those who came before: Clips can be cropped to fit the screen or remain horizontal with bars above and below, must have subtitles, and must cover a whole scene. Networks will try to distinguish their clips by inserting their logo on the page, as well as the title of the show (to avoid comments such as: "What show is this from?"), and occasionally the episode number. The goal is to post a video that is virtually indistinguishable from those uploaded by other users, but that will direct attention towards official sources instead of secondary individuals with no legal claim over the product.

3. Go With the Flow

The relevance of TikTok within debates on the future of television appears to be evident when looking at conversations happening amongst media and entertainment journalists. *Fast Company* asks, "Is TikTok the Future of Television?" (Blancafor, 2023), citing the occasion in which Paramount uploaded the entire Mean Girls movie to its TikTok profile split into 23 parts, and an increasing number of media outlets are asking similar questions. Shows, that one might call TV shows, are being produced for the platform: An example of this is *Cobell Energy*, a scripted show, produced by Adam McCay's production company, that was created exclusively for TikTok (Tingley, 2023). In this case, every episode corresponded to a single TikTok, allowing the story to progress in a more linear fashion, assuming that the TikTok algorithm had the courtesy to show users the show in chronological order. On the other hand, there are amateur productions that gained immense success on the platform, such as the series *Who TF Did I Marry?*, posted by TikTok creator Tareasa "Reesa Teesa" Johnson in early 2024: The creator posted 50 videos recounting the relationship with her ex-husband, and gathered over 450 million impressions (Hailu, 2024). The story, which is now considered a series, is set to be adapted for television. In the case of amateur content, the technique that is typically used to ensure viewers can enjoy a linear narrative is labelling each video as "part 1," "part 2," etc., giving the opportunity to those who encounter a video on their For You page to search for the first video and enjoy the series from the beginning. It is sufficient to look over to TikTok's Chinese counterpart Douyin to imagine what the future of televisual productions looks like for the platform: Douyin carries a slate of original productions, shows comprised of several episodes, or even seasons, split into clips that last between a few minutes and over an hour. As well as producing variety shows, Douyin has also produced mini-dramas, usually offering the first few episodes for free and then requiring a subscription to keep watching. Regardless of the products that can be found on TikTok as of now, it is undeniable that as a platform that is based entirely on audiovisual content, looking at it from an "evolution of television" perspective allows for a more comprehensive view on its inner workings.

The research that is presented in this article is part of a larger study that was conducted to identify the leading narratives amongst TikTok users concerning their perception of the platform and the platform algorithm. A questionnaire was constructed comprising questions concerning users' scope of use of the app, their interaction with the content they are shown, and how they view the platform. The study followed a grounded theory approach (Birks & Mills, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967): Following Hutchinson (1993), a review of existing literature on TikTok was conducted before writing the interview, and the questions that emerged ranged from trying to understand why and how users use TikTok, what they aim to gain through the use of the platform, what kind of relationship they develop with content and content creators, and their level of algorithmic awareness and consequent interactions with platform affordances. The main gap we identified in the literature was a lack of focus on flow experiences within the platform, and whether and how these could compare to televisual experiences. The interviewees were selected through snowball sampling,

starting from a small network of known contacts, and then choosing people from Italy, aged 18–34, who had been TikTok users for at least a year, and used the app at least once a day. The interviews were then conducted both in person and online, recorded, and then transcribed and anonymised (and in the case of this article, translated from Italian to English), and subsequently analysed to extract leading narratives: We identified codes within the transcripts, that were then grouped into concepts and categories. The study was ended once we felt the data on algorithmic awareness had reached saturation. In this article we focus on the category of TikTok as a platform for (televisual) entertainment, bringing forward the two key concepts we identified: TV on TikTok, and TikTok as TV. The results presented in this article are taken from the analysis of 20 of these interviews with Italian users aged 25–34 (one of the most popular age ranges according to data collected by We Are Social [2024]), of which 13 are women and seven are men. The age range was selected considering that although it is the second most popular age group for TikTok users, it is the most popular one for services such as YouTube or Disney+ (according to Benes, 2022), whereas users belonging to the 18–24 range seem to find more appeal in audiovisual content on media-sharing platforms. Table 2 provides information on the interviewees.

Table 2. Research participants.

Participant	Age	Gender	Participant	Age	Gender
P1	26	F	P11	30	M
P2	26	M	P12	31	M
P3	27	F	P13	29	F
P4	26	F	P14	26	F
P5	26	F	P15	30	F
P6	27	F	P16	25	F
P7	33	M	P17	30	F
P8	28	F	P18	29	M
P9	25	F	P19	29	M
P10	26	F	P20	26	M

3.1. TV on TikTok

As seen in the aforementioned examples, there is an increasing number of actual TV products and films present on TikTok. Almost all our interviewees stated that their preferred use of the platform is for entertainment purposes, looking for a place where they can unwind by watching content that they are sure they will enjoy; P3, P15, and P16 mentioned using TikTok to find information, which was also brought up by P6 and P9, who considered TikTok to be a good place to find opinions on products, books, or shows. The algorithmic flow plays a key role in users' enjoyment of televisual content on the platform: P9, P13, P15, P16, P18, and P20 brought up the fact that TikTok has taken the place of YouTube in their viewing habits, citing as one of the main reasons how easy it is to watch enjoyable content on TikTok without having to search for it, as well as the length of the videos:

> I rarely go on YouTube, if I know there is a person who is posting a specific movie review maybe I'll go watch it, but even then I might just watch half of the video because I can't be bothered to finish it. On TikTok I'll start watching something and in two minutes it'll be over. As far as I'm concerned, my experience, I can see TikTok replacing YouTube. (P16)

Our interviewees mentioned that whenever the platform suggests clips from films and TV shows, they end up enjoying them, giving credit to the algorithm and how well it appears to know them:

> I see scenes from films, like clips, and it's all things that I end up watching, like through TikTok I watch a good 20 minutes from certain films because there is scene 1, scene 2, scene 3...and it's all things that I like. (P14)

This is achieved by specific interactions that are enacted by users, who strategically engage with content in order to shape their experience: "If I had a role in shaping my algorithm?! [laughs] I *created* my algorithm!" (P14).

Our interviewees elaborated specific stories about how their algorithm functions (Schellewald, 2022), consequently developing folk theories (DeVito et al., 2017) regarding how to interact with the platform in order to maintain their place in their preferred content niche. Their initial encounter with televisual content on the platform is usually by chance; however, many interviewees stated that an initial video would then lead them to search for more, ending up on pages dedicated to posting entire films or TV shows:

> I think I watched all of *Young Sheldon*, more or less [laughs]....I don't think I could watch the whole thing, but in clips it's okay. But yeah, one of the constant things I see is bits of films and shows, which then sometimes will lead me to watch the other parts, or sometimes I just wait for them to appear. But if something finishes with a cliffhanger I immediately go on the profile to see the next bit, or things like that, I often do that, it's a constant, and I find it funny because I'll read comments that say, "It's the first time I watch a movie on TikTok," and things like that, and I think, "Welcome to my life." (P13)

The idea that through TikTok it is easier to access content is emphasised by the way in which users talk about how content reaches them: As we can see from the above quote, there is the idea that the videos that people like will somehow reach them, without them having to search for them. The interviewees did not appear bothered by the fact that the clips they were shown were out of order; rather, if they found them interesting, they would simply treat them as an entry point to the product. P1 highlighted the key difference between TikTok and a service like Netflix, saying that "Netflix can only dream of being like TikTok," and adding:

> The difference between Netflix and TikTok is simply that Netflix is limited, because of copyright and whatnot. TikTok isn't limited, so on TikTok I can watch anything, on Netflix I can only watch Netflix's catalogue....TikTok seems infinite. TikTok is infinite, that is the problem. Netflix is finite, TikTok is infinite. (P1)

Having many different types of content readily available and delivered to the For You page without having to lift a finger seems to be the main appeal of watching televisual content on a mobile-first vertical platform such as TikTok. Although we have seen the importance of agency in the affirmation of SVOD services, and in general in the enjoyment of on-demand flow experiences, on TikTok we see users watching something because not only did the platform suggest it (as is the case on SVOD services), but the video started playing without the user having to select it: "I started rewatching *Grey's Anatomy* because TikTok was showing me videos, and this happens for a lot of things" (P14).

Moreover, P1, P4, P10, P14, P16, and P19 stated that at times they were influenced by what they were shown on the platform, and ended up watching the product elsewhere in order to fully enjoy it:

A: Recently I watched a movie because I saw bits of it on TikTok. I was influenced.

Q: Some people say you shouldn't watch movies on TikTok.

A: Just as Nolan intended [laughs]. I can't wait for them to put *Oppenheimer* on TikTok. (P4)

A: Lately I had *Abbot Elementary*, it kept turning up. Very cute, it's on Disney+.

Q: You watched it?

A: I watched it, very cute. Other things will appear and I think "skip!" and then I won't watch them. (P1)

However, others felt that by watching clips on TikTok they ended up watching a higher number of films overall:

> Some films are turned into videos and I watch more. I think I end up watching most of the film, I even go and search for the other parts of the movie if I can't find them, but I don't go look for the film [elsewhere]. (P18)

Another example of TV on TikTok is so-called "sludge content" (Weaver, 2023): split screen videos that include TV content on one side of the screen and attention-grabbing videos on the other, such as subway surfer matches, slime videos, soap being cut, or "oddly satisfying" videos. This is one of the techniques that TikTok creators use to capture viewers' attention effectively, and it is frequently used when sharing TV content. Second-screening, meaning using a different screen (usually a smartphone) while watching audiovisual products on a larger screen (usually a television), ends up happening within the same screen, and without users making the conscious decision to watch more than one video at the same time. Some of our interviewees mentioned that this type of content led them to watch clips from shows they otherwise would have skipped, whereas others stated that they did not enjoy sludge content, and would skip the videos altogether.

3.2. TikTok as TV

Taking a step back from specific televisual content, it is also possible to theorise TikTok as a form of TV, not because of the type of videos present on the platform, but because of users' viewing experience on the platform. As we have seen, from a theoretical perspective TikTok matches criteria that were previously used to define television. Our interviewees, when discussing the role the platform played in their everyday media consumption habits, occasionally compared the moments in which they chose to watch TikTok to moments they would have previously dedicated to watching television; when they did not compare them directly, however, it was still possible to see how TikTok occupies periods of time that one might associate to watching television:

Q: When do you watch TikTok?

A: When I'm chilling, when I'm on my lunch break, in the morning I wake up, I look at social media, and then I'll do a couple of quick scrolls on TikTok. I try not to spend a lot of time on it in the morning

> because then I waste time, because once I start I find it hard to stop, I lose track of time and then I'm late. Otherwise yeah, during my lunch break at work, or when I come back home, maybe I have like five minutes and I watch that. (P16)

Here we can find the expectation that TikTok users have that they will always find something they enjoy on their For You page: This correlates to the relationship they form with their algorithm (Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021), and the prospect of reaping the benefits of the effort they put into training it.

When describing the ideal moment to watch TikToks, one moment that recurred in our interviews was the evening:

> The one moment that is a constant is the evening before going to bed, while I'm cooking…but I can only do that now that the videos are longer, it was harder before. (P4)

> The typical moment I'd say is before going to sleep, I get in bed, I open TikTok, and I stay for as long as I can, then I close it, I close my eyes, and sleep. (P20)

While the quotes do not explicitly mention television viewing habits or how they may have evolved, the reference to the end of the day as a time to engage with TikTok suggests a parallel with traditional television consumption. In the collective imagination, the evening is typically associated with relaxation and watching films or TV shows. Thus, the association of this time of day with TikTok viewing carries particular symbolic significance, positioning the platform within a similar temporal context traditionally dominated by television. What is also interesting is that users referred to the length of the videos: Although TikTok was initially conceived to be a short-video platform (Kaye et al., 2022), inheriting the space left by Vine within the media ecosystem, it has become—over the years—a platform that allows videos that can be up to an hour in length. The response to this change varies, with many interviewees stating that they do not enjoy watching videos that are too long, and that "if I want to watch those kinds of videos, I'll go on YouTube or Spotify" (P12):

> Initially when I would see videos that I thought were too long I would skip them because I had the attention span of a hamster, whereas now I've been using them as if they were mini podcasts. I just put them on and listen to them, I watch them while I do other things. (P14)

When asked what platform they would compare TikTok to, P6, P7, and P11 mentioned Instagram, and P4, P18, and P20 mentioned YouTube, placing it therefore in what Bhandari and Bimo classified as content community platforms (2022), ones that place content at the centre and encourage users to create networks surrounding said content. Although this encouragement is not explicit in TikTok's affordances, watching content is the main activity that is suggested, and through the creation of niches, audiences within the app find a sense of community (Jones, 2023; Zulli & Zulli, 2020). The comparison with YouTube is the one that places TikTok closest to debates on the state of television, given that debates on YouTube's similarities and differences to the medium have been discussed at length (see for example Uricchio, 2009).

4. Conclusion

Although our interviews were not specifically targeted towards understanding whether or not the platform could be understood as a form of television, the theme emerged from users' lived experience of the platform.

The continuous algorithmic flow offers an experience so deeply reminiscent of the traditional linear televisual experience that it becomes complicated to interpret it without drawing from a television studies approach.

Johnson (2019) defines online TV as "services that facilitate the viewing of editorially selected audiovisual content through internet-enabled devices" (p. 1). If one were to strictly follow this definition, then, media-sharing platforms could not be included in the category, as they typically do not have editorial control of the content that is uploaded. This changes in the case of original productions on platforms such as YouTube or Douyin, when the platform plays the role of the producer. On a platform like TikTok, it becomes increasingly difficult to assign editorial control: Although the platform has filtering mechanisms in place that contribute to maintaining order within the platform, it is virtually impossible to monitor every video that is uploaded, and the filtering is done to upkeep community standards, not to follow a set agenda.

Although it is true that societal biases intrinsically imbue all algorithmic systems (Airoldi, 2022), and therefore contribute to the popularisation, or lack thereof, of specific types of content (Taylor & Abidin, 2024), it is also true that on TikTok it is possible to find videos with many different points of view, that each individual can watch after being placed in their assigned niche. The algorithmic audiences that are created on the platform do more than categorise the users: By delivering hyperpersonal content, the platform sets off an identification process that accompanies the content one watches. It is important for those who use the platform to recognise themselves in their assigned algorithmic identity (Karizat et al., 2021), as well as to feel that their algorithmically assigned community matches their imagined community (Jones, 2023). This identification process contributes to the development of a relationship between users and their algorithms, and the consequent establishment of a level of trust towards what the algorithmic flow suggests.

The shift from personcasting to datacasting can be observed not so much in the passage from selection on the part of the audience to a complete lean-back experience, but rather in what the audience learns to interact with, and what their interactions make possible: Whereas in the era of personcasting users were (and still are) encouraged to select what to watch, when to watch it, and on what platform, in order to enjoy audiovisual products free from rigid schedules, in the era of datacasting every interaction has the purpose of teaching the platform's algorithm what we like or dislike. This can be observed on several levels: On a platform like TikTok users are encouraged by the interface to interact with the videos they are shown on their For You page, rather than actively choosing what videos to watch (although it remains possible to do so). By doing so, they are contributing to data collection on the part of the platform, as every interaction counts towards composing accurate algorithmically defined identities. On SVOD platforms, users are still encouraged to select the content they most want to watch; however, what they are shown is determined by their previous interactions with the interface.

Within our interviews, the idea of not having to choose what to watch emerged frequently, alongside the idea that the platform would be making the selection based on what it already knew. Experiencing a personalised linear flow of content seemed to be one of the main appeals of TikTok, which is noteworthy considering the leading narrative within media industries that (young) people these days are no longer watching linear television (Davis & Cranz, 2023) in favour of on-demand television and user-generated content.

It is widely accepted that data has now become crucial in most, if not all, platform experiences, and it is essential to delineate consumption models that consider the impact of data on the choices that are made.

By theorising datacasting, we are not aiming to remove user agency in selection processes when it comes to audiovisual content; however, it is almost undeniable that this selection nowadays is very strongly impacted by datafication processes, and therefore users have lost some of their agency.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Ellenrose Firth (PhD) is a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Communication and Social Research at Sapienza University of Rome. Her research interests are at the intersection between the evolution of television and social media platforms, the impact recommendation systems have on user experience and user agency, and the effect digital media platforms have on tourist practices.

Alberto Marinelli (PhD) is chair of the Department of Communication and Social Research, as well as the deputy rector for innovative technologies for communication at Sapienza University of Rome. He is full professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences, Sociology, and Communication where he teaches connected & social TV. His main research interests concern television and the ecosystem of connected viewing, civic engagement and participatory practices on social media, and the network society/platform society.

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ARTICLE

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Between Memeability and Televisuality: The (Self-)Memefication of Television Series

Jana Zündel

Configurations of Film Research Group, Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

Correspondence: Jana Zündel (zuendel@tfm.uni-frankfurt.de)

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Abstract

This essay explores how seriality and televisuality inform and fuel meme culture. Television and streaming series not only provide material for internet memes, i.e., appropriable audio-visual extracts that circulate on social media and video-sharing platforms, but often already feature meme-like visuals themselves, e.g., visual or scenographic imitations of artwork, reenactments of movie scenes, or even entire iconographies of a media franchise. In a semi-historical approach, this essay explores these "memefications" as intertextual practices for recalling, recycling, and preserving cultural artifacts. Citing various cases in US series from an autobiographical collection of such revisualizations and elaborate referential networks in both legacy TV series and popular contemporary shows, this essay proposes a taxonomy of pre-internet memefication within and between series: intermedial, interserial, and intraserial memefications. I discuss them as aesthetic and praxeological precursors of current moving image memes such as TikToks, which similarly restage scenes, characteristics, or tropes from other shows, films, or media. As it is a key characteristic of televisuality to adopt and transform modes of representation from other media, I argue that television may have premeditated and mastered memefication before the conception of internet memes, which are now prevalent in everyday communication.

Keywords

internet memes; memefications; memeability; pre-internet memefication; seriality; televisuality

1. Introduction

In summer 2023, shortly after the second season premiered, Prime Video's series *Good Omens* (2019–present) produced a popular meme. The so-called "Apology Dance" from the first episode that the demon Crowley (David Tennant) performs to conclude a lost argument with his best friend and angel

Aziraphale (Michael Sheen), had numerous imitations on TikTok. Some creators even cosplayed the characters and edited their videos like the original scene (KaiKestis, 2023; Simple Cosplayer 🐶, 2023). In its essence, however, the meme boils down to a short sequence of movements containing the sing-songy words, "You were right, you were right, I was wrong, you were right" (Gaiman et al., 2019–present). Users tiptoe back and forth, flap their hands, spin around, and bow to an implied second party (Matcha, 2023; MYAAAAAAAA, 2023; Figure 1). While certainly not the only internet meme stemming from the beloved series, this segment stands out due to its perceived iconicity, congeniality, and fit with TikTok dance challenges—one of the platform's most popular genres. Thus, it encapsulates television's and particularly fictional series' proneness to memefication, i.e., their visuals, dialogues, or sound bites being seized and processed into various condensed imitative formats, including but not limited to image macros, photo fads, reaction memes, panel memes, GIFs, reels, and TikToks.

Audiovisual memes like this TikTok trend go beyond plain references to TV series, instead producing elaborate revisualizations of specific scenes, motifs, narratives, or tropes, e.g., typical character interactions. Certain elements of *Good Omens* seem to "naturally" lend themselves to imitation and transformative performance, e.g., a funny movement (such as this dance), an outlandish character appearance (Crowley's style and overall attitude), a dramatic close-up (his begrudging expression when apologizing), and a pleasing

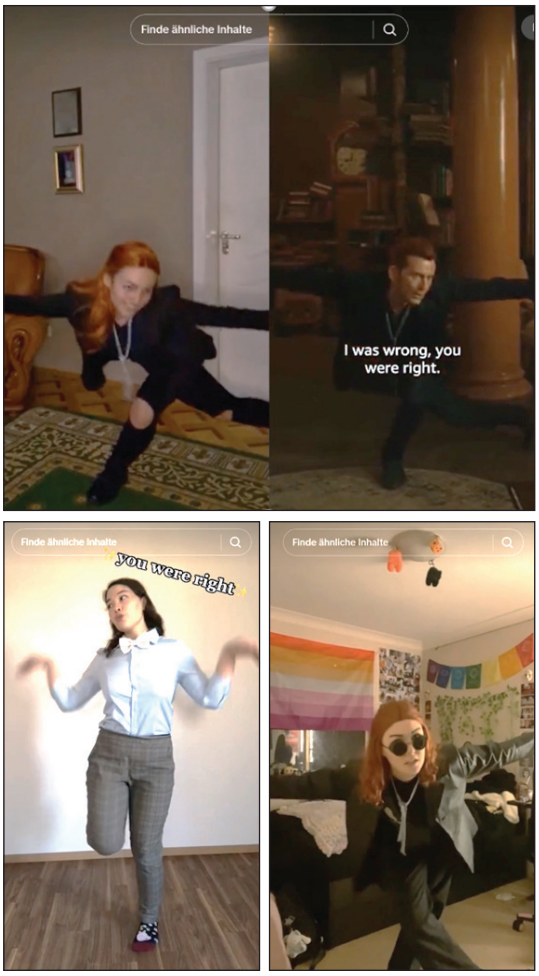

Figure 1. Reenactments of the "Apology Dance" from *Good Omens* on TikTok. Source: Simple Cosplayer 🐶 (2023; upper panel), Matcha (2023; lower left panel), and MYAAAAAAAA (2023, lower right panel).

visual (the setting of an antique bookshop), among others (Figure 1). Today, a series' popularity may partially rely on this memeability, i.e., intelligible, relatable, and appropriable audio-visual extracts that circulate on social media and video-sharing platforms. On the one hand, this is because of TV's ever-increasing presence online: "Like a rainstorm on a flooded plain, internet-distributed television then arrived to a television industry already beginning to drown in a surplus of content" (Lotz, 2018, p. 105). With this abundance of TV and streaming series in our digital media culture, online fan communities, exclusive platforms, and algorithmic recommendations largely shape the buzz surrounding a show's release (cf. Geraghty, 2015; Jenner, 2018; Pajkovic, 2022), providing content management strategies for viewers overwhelmed with choice fatigue and the fear of missing out (cf. Samuel, 2017). On the other hand, television competes and mixes with other audiovisual content; snippets and fragments of a series circulate through various platforms. Overall, the attention span of viewers for any individual one may be rather low. Due to their ubiquity on social media (image- and video-sharing platforms), memes may draw attention to individual scenes, episodes, or even seasons through the continuous use and reproduction of said snippets in diverse communicative contexts. This makes them a common currency for determining a show's success with web audiences.

In this changing media environment, many contemporary series may already anticipate their memefication in a production stage, deliberately providing sassy one-liners, snappy dialogue, strong facial expressions, kooky gestures, or flashy movements that viewers may find suitable for everyday digital communication. However, whether these memes *in potentialis* actually become fully-fledged internet memes is not a given, nor can it be predicted. In the case of *Good Omens*' "Apology Dance," TikTok users have applied it to various situations where someone wants to express accountability and humility in a playful manner or, in turn, when someone would expect an apology for any reason. Being "memeable" in that way may help a TV series gain wider recognition and reach a larger public beyond specialized fan groups and personalized streaming profiles. It intertwines with other appealing features of contemporary TV shows, such as narrative complexity or cinematic special effects, which add some surplus value to the viewing experience (Mittell, 2006, p. 35; cf. Mittell, 2015). Furthermore, memeability contributes to the increasing meta-textuality and overall self-awareness of a series, addressing well-versed and "responsive" viewers who actively engage with a show on social media (cf. Giannini, 2024). Consequently, these media-savvy audiences may act as multipliers or marketing agents, e.g., by creating and sharing memes out of these meta-textual instances that re- and de-construct a series' narrative and production.

Broadly defined as "groups of content items" or "digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance" (Shifman, 2014, p. 41) that are deliberately generated and disseminated, internet memes have become an integral part of our shared "cultural lexicon" (Journell & Clark, 2019, p. 109). They are characterized by their aesthetic diversity, referential complexity, and chaotic use in media culture (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, pp. 483–484). Therefore, memes have become a collective term for the confusing image repertoire and the "diverse processes of appropriation and reinterpretation" (Gerling et al., 2018, p. 219) of digital media. If, according to Limor Shifman's (2014, p. 2) broadest definition, "any kind of information that can be copied by imitation" counts as a meme, the aesthetic and cultural repertoire expand considerably. Classic "meme genres" like image macros or Photoshop memes (Maeder & Wentz, 2014, p. 138) are then joined by all image formats that "perform" some kind of mimicry, e.g., GIFs, TikToks, or reels. Moreover, this is just the tip of the digital iceberg: Aside from internet memes, many a "unit of imitation" (Dawkins, 2016/1976, p. 249) emerges in popular media texts like TV series before or without online participation. TV and streaming series frequently feature what I call pre-internet memefications, i.e.,

revisualizations of iconic artwork, reenactments of famous movie scenes, or adopted iconographies from visual culture. In contrast to internet memes, which are user-generated, "bottom-up," "spreadable" image or video formats that easily circulate in our networked culture (Jenkins, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2013), pre-internet memefications are produced "top-down" by television creators and may not multiply across various media channels. Rather than a group of images with similar characteristics, they present as a single memetic iteration of a popular moving image. However, I consider them to be aesthetic and praxeological precursors of recent moving image memes such as the above-discussed TikTok, similarly performing motifs, characteristics, settings, or tropes from other media. Memefications activate our icono- and scenographic memory, grab the knowledgeable viewer's attention, and possibly motivate them to return for the next episode or rewatch the series. In a semi-historic approach, this essay explores "memefications" as intertextual practices for recalling, recycling, and preserving cultural artifacts. I aim to highlight television's ability to adapt and incorporate representational techniques from other media, thereby underscoring its role in the development of memes as we know them today. This essay argues that seriality and televisuality have always informed meme culture and continue to do so.

2. The Memeability of TV series

What makes TV series especially "memeable" on a structural level are the interrelations and parallels between television and memes.

Firstly, TV shows produce memeable content on a regular basis, i.e., through weekly broadcasts or full-season-drops. There is an "everyday-ness" to internet memes that mirrors television's role in commonplace media consumption. Like TV series, memes are "producerly texts," which John Fiske described as simultaneously popular, accessible, and easily understandable texts that are nonetheless open to interpretation and meaning-making (Fiske, 1986, 2011). Like TV episodes, memes often mix with everyday topics or special interests, i.e., they simultaneously process intersubjectively comprehensible situations or collective experiences *and* demonstrate "insider knowledge," respectively. This ambivalence is especially crucial to memes that emerge from television.

Secondly, memes are defined by "serial processuality" through "coupling, doubling, replication, repetition, imitation" (Maeder & Wentz, 2014, p. 130). Memeing means reiterating a basic pattern with just enough variation to appear fresh, yet familiar to spectators—as is the case with serial storytelling. Finding that sweet spot between redundancy and variation is an important trait of any successful TV show, most notably for classic episodic formats such as procedurals or sitcoms. The latter shares another formal characteristic with (most) internet memes—both often rely on the classic structure of a joke: set-up, punchline. Seriality and repeatability highlight television's popularity and mainstream nature, its ability to establish and nurture a common ground between many different viewers, establishing a shared language made of characters, settings, tropes, and references. These are constitutive for popular, producerly texts as well as memes to serve as "agents in the social circulation of meaning and pleasure" (Nešović, 2021, p. 290).

Thirdly, meme creation and distribution are ongoing series or serials of cultural reproduction—depending on the degree of variation and repetition between the iterations of the respective meme. Memefication is a continuous practice. TV memes like "Homer backs into bushes" from *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989–present, S5E16) are endlessly repeatable and variable, e.g., by merging with other TV memes. One amalgamation

replaces Homer Simpson with a comic version of Vanessa Vanjie Matteo, a drag queen who became a popular meme herself. During her elimination from the reality competition *RuPaul's Drag Race*, she said "Miss Vanjie" three times and walked backwards to the stage exit (Bailey et al., 2009–present, S10E01). Such intricate combinations of television references establish intertextual networks and, consequently, require extensive media literacy to be deciphered and fully appreciated.

Fourthly, meme culture reflects the dislocation of television content today. With marketing slogans like "TV Everywhere" highlighting the medium's mobility, TV series are perceived to be "everywhere" in digital media culture. Memes are similarly ubiquitous and always "on the move" through different platforms—as are TV audiences and fan groups in pursuit of new episodes and paratextual material, including memes, of their favorite shows.

Because of these relations between television and meme culture, any TV moment could become a meme as long as it involves a somewhat memorable quote, motif, or character expression. At the same time, the audio-visual item must be comprehensible and recognizable, "narratively" open enough to interpretation and thus appropriable to various situations. In this way, meme creation is comparable to other appropriating and interpreting practices of "forensic fandom" (Harriss, 2017; Mittell, 2013) surrounding TV series. Their memefication is a form of "textual poaching" because fans and other interest groups exploit media texts for various creative and communicative purposes (cf. Jenkins, 2013). The memefication of televisual material is an unruly practice in contemporary digital media culture.

However, memefication did not originate on the internet. As Limor Shifman points out: "The meme is a natural for studying Internet and digital culture. Memetic behavior is not novel, but its scale, scope, and global visibility in contemporary digital environments are unprecedented" (Shifman, 2013, p. 373). Memes in the original cultural-evolutionary sense, coined by Dawkins (2016/1976, p. 249), are understood as "unit[s] of transmission," i.e., ideas or concepts that are passed on, reproduced, and transformed by media. Before the current "hyper-memetic era" and "the coupling of the meme concept and digital communication" (Shifman, 2013, p. 373), other visual media produced composite images with culturally encoded messages that resonated with audiences, e.g., caricatures or comics (Milner, 2018, pp. 50–53). These revisualizations did not yet involve active participation and circulation on the part of the viewers. Television, for instance, has always reused other media and art forms, adopting, collaging, and transforming their modes of representation (Bleicher, 2011). Many TV scholars, including John Caldwell (1995) in his book *Televisuality*, have pointed out television's ability to imitate the aesthetics and cultural forms of other media or adapt to new artistic and technological standards of image production (Adelmann, 2015; Bleicher et al., 2010; Jacobs & Peacock, 2013; O'Regan, 2012). As a "reproduction and exploitation machine for all kinds of visualizations" (Adelmann, 2015, p. 99), television participates in processes of remediation. On the one hand, remediation means the adaptation of "representational practices" from other media as part of television's ongoing repurposing and restoration (Bolter, 2007, p. 25), making TV formats a mosaic of multiple media aesthetics. One facet of remediation is especially relevant here: hypermediacy, i.e., the co-presence of different media techniques, text types, and forms of representation in one medium (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 6). As Bolter and Grusin state, television has always been hypermedia, as it "seems willing to entertain a wider range of visual and cultural styles and to remediate other media more vigorously and more frankly than popular film" (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, pp. 185, 188). On the other hand, remediation involves recurring representations of the same historic events across various media (Erll, 2008, p. 392). This extends to the representation, or

more specifically, re-enactment of specific media events, imageries, and texts: "Remediation is not restricted to icons and narratives, but can even choose actual media products and media technologies as its objects" (Erll, 2008, p. 394).

Through remediation, television continually builds a "catalogue" of media constructions, narratives, and iconographies. Similarly, through imitation, memes build volatile and dynamic repositories of (moving) images. Both TV series and internet memes are exemplary of these recurring processes of remembering media through other media. As a meta-medium, television has already mastered memefication like hardly any other medium. As such, the memefication in and of TV series both precedes and exceeds internet memes. Television "memefied" other cultural texts as well as its own well before the rise of social media, even before the World Wide Web—making *meme-ability* a prerequisite of televisuality. This is of course most notable in explicit parodies of movies in sketch shows like *Saturday Night Live* (Michaels et al., 1975–present). However, pre-internet memefication is also prominent in fictional series, which I will explore in the next section. As a televisual practice rather than a fixed image or video format, memefication is not only a signifier of the medium's legacy, but a process of cultural preservation, shaped by (tele-)seriality.

3. Pre-Internet Memefication

Pre-internet memefication includes remediations and reenactments from other audiovisual artifacts in originally broadcast series (even if they can be streamed now), as well as the reproduction of a series' visual features within other media before the internet existed or before the show incited online participation. To discuss the categories of pre-internet memefications, I am going back to the televisual material itself because it allows me to examine the medium's strategies of "recalling" other cultural texts. Because this essay explores pre-internet memefication exclusively through the lens of fictional TV series, the herein proposed taxonomy (Figures 2 and 7) provides an overview of this media-cultural phenomenon and, ideally, a useful tool for further investigation into television's memetic practices. It does not make any claim to completeness, nor does it serve as a comprehensive method for analyzing a series' manifold intertextualities. Intertextuality, though a key factor in their appeal and success with audiences (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, pp. 213–215), is not unique to internet memes—or television for that matter. Culture as a whole is a network of intertextualities that transcend genres and media (Fiske, 2013, p. 65). The first level in the taxonomy below reflects this, signifying that all memefication is intertextual. Pre-internet memefication is but one of many intertextual operations within TV series, albeit a specific one. It involves "performative citations" of other media texts, characterized by some degree of creative transformation and visual deconstruction (Taylor, 2022, p. 109)—which is not an exclusive televisual but rather a universal practice in and among semiotic systems to circulate meaning (cf. Chambat-Houillon & Wall, 2004). However, I am suggesting memefication as an additional lens to look at visual citations and allusions to other media texts, specifically in TV shows, to highlight their serial, gestural, iconographic, and scenographic aspects. Looking at pre-internet memefications may then offer new insights into moving image meme formats such as GIFs, mashups, or TikToks, where these aspects now make them appealing for online communication and distribution, or in short, spreadable.

Plain quotes or spoken references like characters retelling what happened in a movie, TV show, or play, as well as sonic recalls, e.g., reusing the soundtrack of a movie, do not qualify as pre-internet memefications. Neither do playbacks of an original scene, e.g., a film or program on TV in the background. The taxonomy

and subsequent analyses focus specifically on the audiovisual imitations and subsequent transformations of other media texts throughout scenes, scenography, image composition, and performances in a series. These instances of revisualization and remediation usually carry out narratological and discursive operations, generating visual spectacle as well as narrative special effects for additional viewing pleasure (cf. Mittell, 2006). Memefications can be intermedial, when television "borrows" from other media, e.g., film, and intramedial, whenever television remediates its own formats. In relation to TV series, I differentiate intramedial memefication into interserial memefication, where "series A" revisualizes elements from "series B," and intraserial memefication, in which a series restages occurrences from previous episodes in a later episode. Most instances of intermedial and interserial memefication cited here are pastiche, i.e., visual homages and citations of style for additional narrative or discursive layers. However, depending on how the corresponding scene embeds and functionalizes the memefication, some cases lean towards parody, i.e., the exaggerated and mocking use of formal and stylistic devices for pop-cultural reflection and critique. With intraserial memefications, TV shows commit to parody, using this opportunity to demonstrate self-awareness and ironize their own narrative. Concerning online memefication, I have already touched on the potentially imitable or reproducible materials provided by series with the introductory example from *Good Omens*. I will revisit this sub-category of intermedial memefication in Section 4 after discussing its aesthetic and praxeological precursors on television. Therefore, the next subsections introduce intermedial, interserial, and intraserial memefication using examples from popular US series from the 1980s to the 2010s. It is a subjective sample shaped by the accessibility of the series in Germany, technological obstacles to securing the material, platform affordances, autobiographical research, and personal memory. The examples do not present as extraordinary, particularly sophisticated cases but rather as common instances of televisual remediation and cultural reproduction. Therefore, the selection may not feature the most significant or canonic memefications from TV history. I invite readers of this article to compare the presented cases to examples from their own media memory to assess the suggested taxonomy.

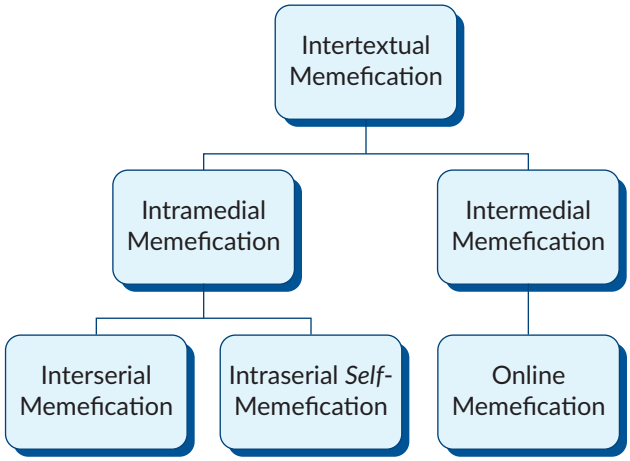

Figure 2. Taxonomy of memefication in TV series.

3.1. Intermedial Memefication

Pre-internet memefication on television is a form of remediation. This is most evident in intermedial memefication, where TV series reimagine icons and imagery from different media formats, e.g., feature films. Some of television's approaches to film aesthetics are known as "cinematic TV." This term describes

strategies for emulating creative standards from cinema into TV shows (Mills, 2013, p. 58). For example, the so-called "quality series" of the 2000s adopted production practices and modes of representation from *auteur cinema* (cf. Blanchet, 2010) and Hollywood blockbusters (cf. Eichner, 2013). The term "cinematic TV" has been criticized for upholding cultural hierarchies between film and television and ultimately dismissing televisual style (Jaramillo, 2013). Still, viewers can observe how television communicates and consolidates "cinematic knowledge" (Braidt, 2011) through intermedial memefication. As a result, some prestige series stand out due to their distinctive visual style, which sometimes correspond to popular cinematography or genre traditions. However, pre-internet memefication produces more explicit representations of cinematic works than simply alluding to the artistic style of an auteur, a genre, or a cinematic "look."

Among television's manifold displays of visual style and masquerade (Caldwell, 2002, pp. 166, 200) are pre-internet memefications built on the iconicity of particular shots or scenes, characters or actor personae, and costumes or settings from films, comics, or video games (Figure 3). For example, TV series have characters appear in masks or costumes of famous movie characters (Figure 3, no. 15) in Halloween episodes or at other costume parties. Recent examples include the children from *Stranger Things* dressing up as the *Ghostbusters* (1984; Duffer & Duffer, 2016–present, S2E2; Figure 3, no. 13) and the teenagers from *Euphoria* masquerading as Marlene Dietrich, Juliet in an angel costume from Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* (1996; Figure 3, nr. 12), and the child prostitute Iris from *Taxi Driver* (1976; Levinson, 2018–present, S1E6). On the one hand, these are one-off appearances of "character memes" limited to one episode. On the other hand, because many network or cable shows cover Halloween every year, such pre-internet memefication is a fixed pillar of televisual remediation. For many shows, memefication is central to their aesthetics, principal photography, and narrative fabric. Pop-culturally perceptive shows frequently adapt iconic movie scenes (Figure 3). *Euphoria* had main actors Zendaya and Hunter Schaefer reenact a scene from *Titanic* (1997; Levinson–present, 2018, S2E4; Figure 3, nr. 5). *The O.C.* is famous for its homage to the upside-down kiss from *Spiderman* (2002), which served as the climax of the evolution of a romantic relationship (Schwartz, DeLaurentis, et al., 2003–2006, S2E14; Figure 3, no. 3). *Gossip Girl* emphasized the contrast between the main characters, frenemies Serena and Blair, through reenactments of Marilyn Monroe's and Audrey Hepburn's most iconic movie appearances (Schwartz, Savage, et al., 2007–2012, S1E4+14, S2E16, S5E13; Figure 3, nos. 1 and 11). In its musical episodes, *Riverdale* featured appearances of *Carrie* (1976) and the *Heathers* (1989 film and 2018 musical; Figure 3, nos. 6 and 7). *Pretty Little Liars* recreated either shots or entire scenes from various Alfred Hitchcock movies or classic film noir. Examples include:

- A shot-by-shot replication of the infamous shower scene in *Psycho* (1960; King, 2010–2017, S2E25; Figure 3, nos. 10 and 14), though the series inverts the shot composition, thus transforming the visual citation according to memetic creativity (cf. Taylor, 2022);
- A reenactment of the climactic scene in *Dial M for Murder* (1954) in which a character fights off an attacker (King, 2010–2017, S5E6; Figure 3, no. 8);
- A variety of (single) shots throughout the series that recall iconic movie shots from *Rebecca* (1940; King, 2010–2017, S3E24; Figure 3, no. 9), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Laura* (1944), or *The Big Combo* (1955; King, 2010–2017, S4E19; Figure 3, no. 2).

Understanding and appreciating intermedial memefications requires a wide range of pop cultural knowledge. Because they speak to our iconographic memory, they educate and cultivate an audience of media-savvy viewers who focus on spotting and analyzing references as part of forensic fandom (cf. Mittell, 2013).

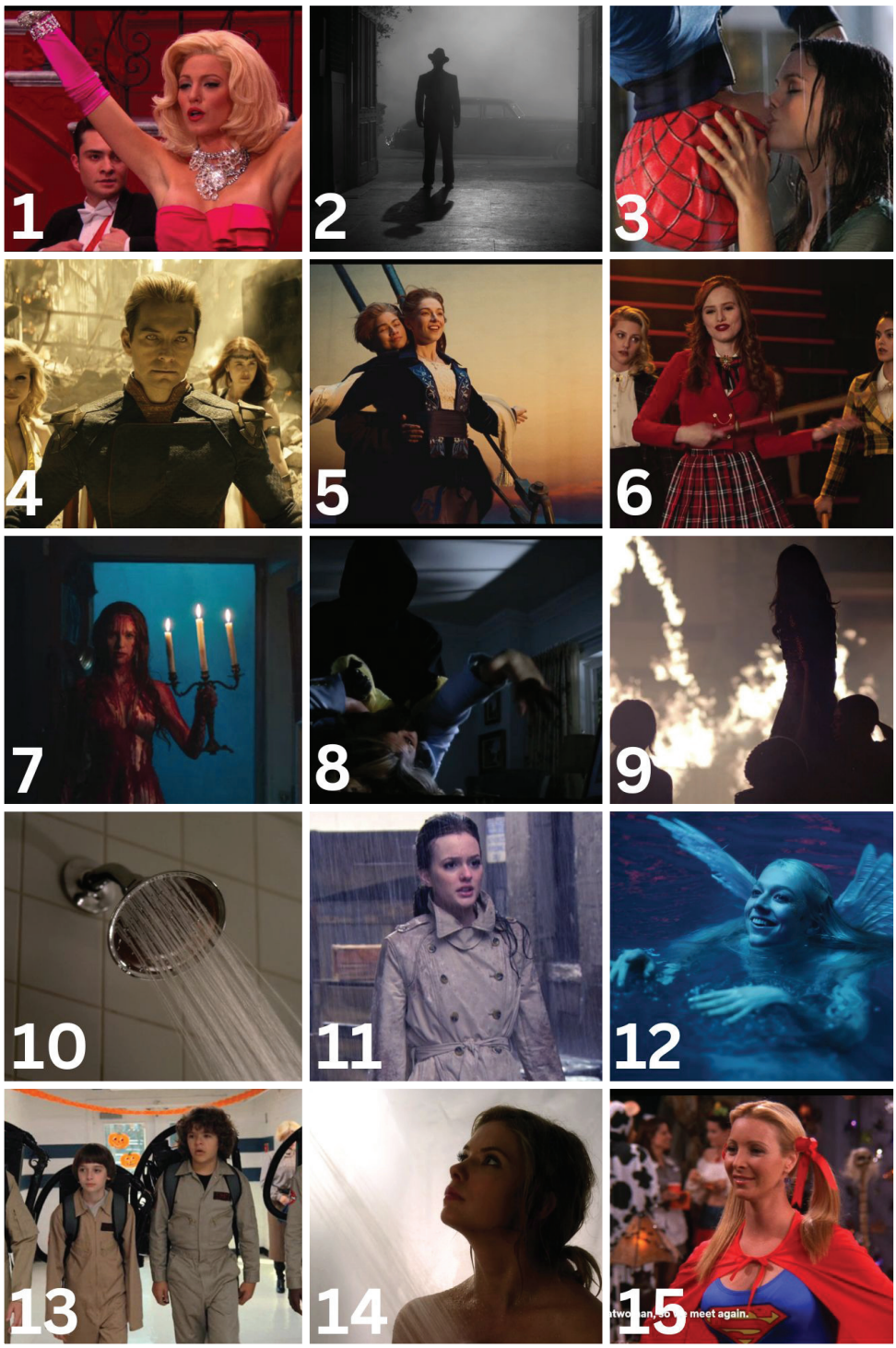

Figure 3. Intermedial memefications of movie iconographies in *Euphoria* (nos. 5, 12), *Friends* (no. 15), *Gossip Girl* (nos. 1, 11), *Pretty Little Liars* (nos. 2, 8–10, 14), *Riverdale* (nos. 6–7), *Stranger Things* (no. 13), *The Boys* (no. 4), and *The O.C.* (no. 3).

Simultaneously, the televisual "repackaging" conveys filmic or cinematic knowledge to new audiences. As part of cultural reproduction mechanisms, intermedial memefications are "performances of adaptation" (Gratch & Gratch, 2021, pp. 143–145) that extend a text's or a group of texts' cultural impact. The most

systematic realization of such intermedial memefication occurs in shows like Prime Video's superhero satire *The Boys* (Kripke, 2019–present), which copy and satirize the entire iconography of a movie franchise, in this case the Marvel and DC Cinematic Universes (Figure 3, no. 4). The creative memetic transformation in this particular series is most significant on the level of *stance*, i.e., the tone and style of the meme and its communicative functions (Shifman, 2013, pp. 40–41). The satirist use of superhero imagery, on the one hand, emphasizes Marvel and DC's dominance in Western popular culture. On the other hand, the familiar icons and motifs serve as vessels for the pointed critique of celebrity culture and media conglomerates. This "reframing" is common in pre-internet memefication, because TV series must tailor the referenced text elements to their characters and narratives. Gratch and Gratch (2021, p. 146) explain that

> Reframing alters the incorporated source(s) to fit the needs, desires, or beliefs of the adapter. Such adaptations may even attempt to reclaim or otherwise control the narrative of the source media, shifting the discursive fields in which all adaptations of the meme are involved.

Thus, the conveyed filmic and pop cultural knowledge is not indisputable, but always the result of an ongoing intermedial debate that "memetic television" makes visible.

Intermedial memefication is not limited to film references. Television culture is "part of a global media culture that is increasingly characterized by intervisual forms of design that blur the boundaries between the visual worlds of art, cinema, television and the internet" (Bleicher, 2011, p. 303). Consequently, through "intervisuality," memefications also recreate famous works of art, like Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks* in *That '70s Show* (Turner et al., 1998–2006, S1E8), *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989–present, S8E18), or *Dead Like Me* (Fuller et al., 2003–2004, S1E12). One opening sequence of *Euphoria* recreates historically significant paintings and photographs, e.g., *The Birth of Venus* (Botticelli), *The Lovers II* (René Magritte), *Rolling Stones*' cover of John Lennon and Yoko Ono (Annie Leibovitz), and Frida Kahlo's *Self Portrait as a Tehuana* (Levinson, 2018–present, S2E4). Alternatively, the series visualizes a cultural theme such as the Japanese pictorial maxim of the "Three Monkeys." Its visual or narrative adaptations have been frequent, highlighting the teleserial nature of remediation (Figure 4). For example, the sitcoms *Golden Girls* (Harris et al., 1985–1992, S1E21) and *Friends* (Bright et al., 1994–2004, S1E21) each recall the motif with a comical shot in which three characters are posed as the iconic monkeys covering their eyes, ears, and mouth ("see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil"). The fantasy drama *Charmed* dedicates an entire episode to the proverbial principle, with the three main characters losing their senses of sight, hearing, and speaking, respectively (Burge et al., 1998–2006, S5E20). Memetic recurrences of artwork(s) from any media in television "test" if these cultural icons are appropriable to new contexts and narratives and, consequently, remain meaningful to contemporary audiences (Taylor, 2022, pp. 109–110). In an intertextual web where televisual and other images constantly reference each other, "each media commodity becomes, at the instant of its release, an archive to be plundered, an original to be memorized, copied, and manipulated" (De Kosnik, 2016, p. 4). In turn, television acts as a "media archive" that "integrates previous cultural forms of expression into its offering" (Bleicher, 2011, p. 289). Its "visual opulence" (Bleicher, 2011, p. 302) and "performance of style" (Caldwell, 2002, p. 166) train viewers in media literacy, i.e., the ability to understand and negotiate meanings in an audiovisual culture, as well as to evaluate media contents and create communications from it (Koltay, 2011, pp. 212–213). This includes the reuse of aesthetics or visual representations from new formats and other texts.

Figure 4. Serial remediation of the "Three Monkeys" meme in *Golden Girls* (S1E21, left), *Friends* (S1E21, middle), and *Charmed* (S5E20, right).

Television's pre-internet memefications appeal to both individual and collective image memory, for which they continuously provide updates. This reproduction of the same or similar images is a core characteristic of teleseriality, but on a broader scale, it also mirrors pop culture's constant state of recalling and recycling its imagery and audiovisualities. Pastiche series such as *Gossip Girl*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Riverdale*, and *Euphoria* push pop culture's self-referentiality as far as possible. Drawing on the visual registers of prior media texts constitutes the appropriation and appreciation of cultural history. This process contributes to canon formation and consolidation because these pre-internet memefications tell us which artworks are relevant for participating in cultural conversations. Every TV series operates within a specific cultural framework, which is reflected through these revisualizations. They ensure the preservation and reproduction of cultural heritage, usually dominated by US and Western products. TV shows have rehashed and popularized historic cultural items for contemporary audiences. Popular culture is an autopoietic system, producing and maintaining itself through the currency of intertextual references and memes. Hyper-referential shows like the previously mentioned illustrate that memefication has only grown in recent TV and web series as they circulate across various channels and find new audiences online, possibly through internet memes. Conversely, teleserial memefications increasingly revolve around themselves, addressing dedicated and adept fans in the process.

3.2. Interserial Memefication

The next subsections explore how pre-internet memefication on television shifts from imitating features from other media to revisualizing and commenting on itself. I am now looking at cases where series mimic *each other* for dramatic, comedic, or satiric purposes. Interserial memefications display specific intertextual networks that intertwine with a series' overall narrative, themes, or character perspectives, adding not only aesthetic surplus value, but also additional layers of interpretation and signification beyond the story at hand. More than characters simply wearing costumes from a different series, these are performances of another show's trademarks, e.g., its visual style, scenography or settings, character gestures, and countenances. They either restage a specific scene from another show or, alternatively, reinvent a typical scene that reflects the other series' characterizations, narratives, and eccentricities. Examples are countless, occurring in any TV decade and serial genre. A dream sequence in *The Nanny* (Jacobson et al., 1993–1999, S4E14) spoofed characters from the prime-time soap opera *Dynasty*. Netflix' *Dear White People* (Simien et al., 2017–2021) created various fictitious "shows within a show" that parodied popular prestige series, including *Scandal* (named "Defamation" in the series, S1), *Empire* ("Prince O'Palities," S2), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (S3). *Riverdale*'s pilot alludes to the scenery and "mood" of *Twin Peaks* (Aguirre-Sacasa et al., 2017–2023). In the

Supernatural episode "Changing Channels" (Kripke, 2005–2020, S5E8), the series' leads are forced to act as the main characters in parodies of *CSI: Crime Investigation*, *Grey's Anatomy* (named "Dr. Sexy, M.D."), *Knight Rider*, and *Two and a Half Man*. These memefications include mannerisms from the referenced shows or what Bollywood choreographers call "signature movements" (Basu, 2021). For instance, the *Supernatural* episode mocks the habit of CSI investigators of dramatically taking off or putting on their sunglasses when arriving and leaving a crime scene, respectively. In *The Nanny*'s *Dynasty* spoof, the titular character exaggeratedly purses her lips, recalling Joan Collins' acting (Figure 5). Most often, imitations like these are loving homages to the "original" texts, reflecting back on the characters that enact them. However, some intradiegetic shows highlight narrative flaws, thematic ironies, or even controversies of the referenced series. *Dear White People*'s version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, criticizes the latter's focus on white female characters as victims of oppression and exploitation—as opposed to women of color, who have endured similar or worse injustice, but were not represented on television. In a dialogue from the parody, the main white character laments the enslavement of women for reproductive purposes, which is a direct reference to the Gilead regime in the actual series: "Can you believe this is happening? I mean, this used to be America" (Figure 5). A Black character sarcastically responds: "Injustice in America. Who could've guessed?" (Simien et al., 2017–2021).

Interserial memefications display "interserial coherence," i.e., intertextual constellations that create links between knowledge systems and communities of two or more series (Weber & Junklewitz, 2016, p. 10). As creatively modified citations, they treat one show as a "fictional artifact" in the second to argue for a shared media reality with viewers (Weber & Junklewitz, 2016, pp. 10–13). This has significant consequences for the reception: audiences produce and compare "cognitive maps" of various TV series and their shared information units or points of friction (Mittell, 2015, p. 166). Through interserial memefication, television reflects on itself, training viewers to recognize and appreciate its "legacy shows" and even critically reflect on them. After all, we experience and remember media (history) mostly through other media. Moreover,

Figure 5. Interserial memefication in *Dear White People* (S3E1, upper left), *Riverdale* (S1E1, upper right), *The Nanny* (S4E14, bottom left), and *Supernatural* (S5E8, bottom right).

television is notorious for inserting itself into its historicization, i.e., for producing its past through its own devices and formats, including but not limited to historical documentaries (Engell, 2005). Interserial memefications act as television's meta-memory because they remind audiences of the medium's historical and cultural impact. A recent example is Marvel's miniseries *WandaVision* (Feige et al., 2021), which tackled the evolution of sitcoms, representing one decade of television comedy in each episode. This included the memefication of sitcom classics through character archetypes and tropes, era-specific plotlines and jokes, costumes and décor, and narrative and visual style. *WandaVision* mimicked the stylistic "formation of epochs and phases" that is characteristic of televisual depictions of history (Engell, 2005, p. 73). Here, TV refers to its "internal horizon," thus interweaving historiography and autobiography (Engell, 2005, p. 61). With interserial memefication, the medium reassures itself of its legacy and solidifies its visual repertoire, i.e., its *televisuality*. TV series continuously build a collective frame of reference for the audience, especially loyal viewers and fans. This way, television becomes its own echo chamber as it recalls and resells its products to the point of self-memefication within a single series.

3.3. Intraserial Self-Memefication

For intraserial memefication, TV shows do not have to look past their own narrative and visual realms. These memes are reperforming and mimicking a series' very own trademarks. For example, characters can imitate each other, both physically and through costume. In a Halloween episode of *Friends* (Bright et al., 1994–2004, S8E6), Joey arrives in Chandler's clothes and exaggerates the latter's mannerisms, thereby trolling his friend and entertaining the rest of the group. Similarly, *The Big Bang Theory*'s Sheldon and Amy dress up as their peers Howard and Bernadette, respectively, to highlight their flaws. Amy imitates Bernadette's high-pitched voice, mockingly exclaiming "I'm being unnecessarily hurtful but with a sweet voice" (Lorre & Prady, 2007–2019, S12E6). Even more significant than these brief "character enactments" are "shows within a show" that mirror the series' premise, setting, characters, and events. *The Nanny* showed a scene snippet from "Royal Flush," a fabricated show that featured the same archetypes, e.g., the nosy butler and the street-smart "maid," and served as a pun on the rival show *Full House* (Jacobson et al., 1993–1999, S2E12). A main character in *Community*, the pop culture obsessed Abed, wrote and directed the campus show "The Community College Chronicles," basing all of its characters on his study group. The web show predicts, or rather "pre-enacts," future events in the series (Harmon, 2009–2014; S1E9). Self-memefication strengthens the "intraserial coherence" of TV shows, i.e., their inner narrative nexuses (Weber & Junklewitz, 2016). This strategy also intersects with other teleserial devices such as recapping or diegetic retelling (cf. Mittell, 2015; Newman, 2006). Furthermore, it adapts the "replay" and "rewind" functions that audiences have become accustomed to through video and DVD players and streaming services. Some memes replay key scenes from a show's history: In the intradiegetic theatrical play "The Bloody Hand," *Games of Thrones* put on spoofy reenactments of main character deaths from seasons one and four that were significant turning points in the overall story (Benioff & Weiss, 2011–2019, S6E5–6). The *Euphoria* episode "The Theater and Its Double" recreated scenes from season 1 in a school play written by a supporting character to present her perspective on past events (Levinson, 2018–present, S2E7; Figure 6). In general, self-repetition is a text mediation strategy that compensates for different levels of knowledge and attention spans among viewers (Mittell, 2015, p. 181). However, intraserial memefications, as previously described, do not simply repeat past events but put a comedic, satiric, or otherwise re-interpretative "spin" on them. In contrast to classic recaps, flashbacks, or diegetic retellings, these self-reflexive performances address regular viewers and fans rather than distracted or casual audiences.

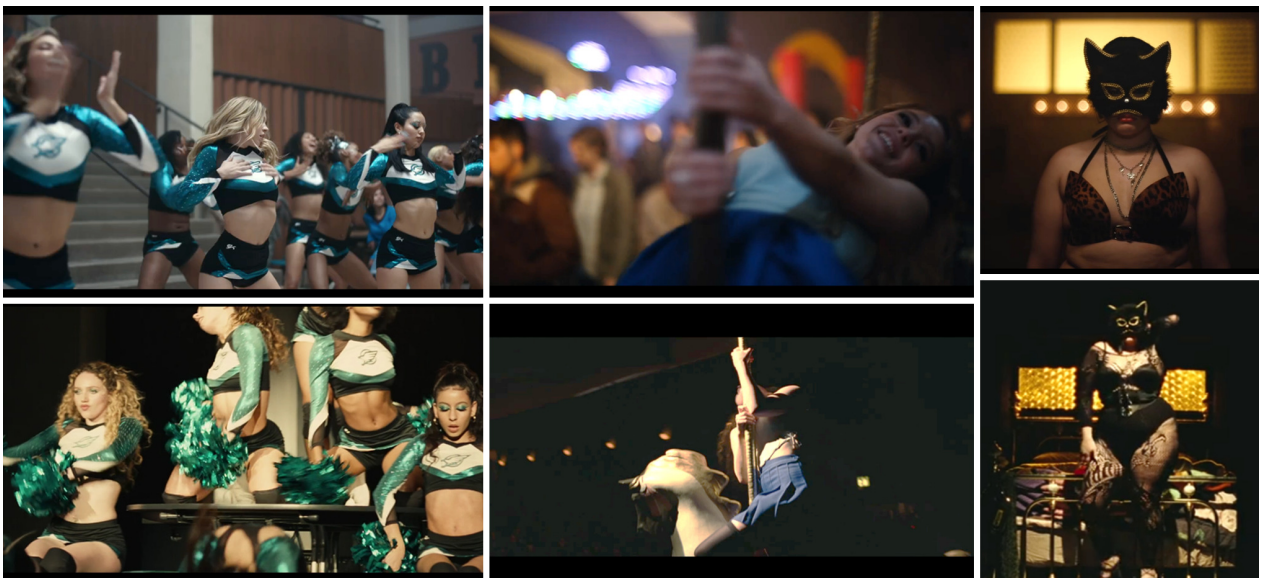

Figure 6. Self-memefication in *Euphoria*: Original scenes (top row, various episodes of S1) and their theatrical reenactments (bottom row, S2E7).

A TV series imitates itself to maintain the sovereignty of interpretation over its history and to advocate for its cultural significance. Therefore, intraserial memefications represent a self-preserving micro-strategy of television, following up and doubling down on interserial memefication. Self-memefication can even merge with intermedial or interserial imitations, creating a network of intertextual and multimedia references. Some of *The Nanny*'s intraserial memefications, for instance, restage the show's signature conflicts and character relations through the performance and visual style of other series, films, or plays. In addition to the *Dynasty* spoof, the show retold its central "will-they-won't-they" plot involving the titular nanny and her boss through a fantasy sequence in film noir style (Jacobson et al., 1993–1999, S4E18) and a parody of *The Dick van Dyke Show* (S4E4). These elaborate multi-layered memefications demonstrate that TV series are simultaneously mashups and archives of themselves, of television, and of media culture as a whole. Thus, they function as a medium of commemorative culture: television producers use them to remind viewers of creative achievements and (former) aesthetic standards of audiovisual media. At the same time, TV audiences may perceive (and subsequently use) television as a mediator of personal or collective cultural memory (Erll, 2005, p. 135). As TV became increasingly self-aware, televisuality grew denser with these self-reflexive and self-historizing moments. Intraserial memefication demonstrates how television, as a major producer of pop culture, anticipates its exploitation and transformation through other media. TV series in particular are "agents" of fundamental change in media culture (Beil et al., 2016, p. 10). On the one hand, they are exposed to aesthetic, technological, and institutional shifts in media systems, which they reflect in their narratives and modes of representation. On the other, they promote these very changes through "transmediatization," meaning the expansion or migration of their stories, characters, settings, and other serial elements across different media, thereby ensuring television's "survival in a different form" (Beil et al., 2016, p. 10). In contemporary media culture, a series' transmediatization includes internet memes. Contemporary, self-reflexive shows are particularly responsive to appropriative practices in digital culture. Consequently, these shows often pre-manufacture their memefication on the social web, thus premeditating "new" meme formats such as TikToks, which revolve around reenactments and parodies.

4. Online Memefication

Returning to the premise of this article—that TV series frequently produce "memeable" content—it is worth pointing out some memes in *potentialis*. As mentioned in the introduction, they are easily imitable or reproducible elements designed to become internet memes, such as:

- Over-the-top or comic relief characters who regularly utter pointed "one-liners" and present strong facial expressions or outlandish behavior are popular material for reaction memes or GIFs;
- Ambiguous or suggestive motifs can be worked into thumbnails, mashups, or fan collages;
- A series' general showmanship and visual spectacle were put forward for reenactments in Instagram reels or TikToks.

Consequently, TV series provide us with a plethora of "memes in waiting" that aim at their eventual "transmediatization" (Beil et al., 2016, p. 10) and circulation beyond the series, as snippets, stills, soundbites, or other fragments on the web. When exposed to internet meme culture, they migrate through social media and video-sharing platforms, making their way into everyday communications. The cross-platform production of memes has great practical value for maintaining and expanding fan culture: Through memes (and other social media affordances), fans share a series' universe and potentially create new semantic connections to other media formats (Presswood & Granelli, 2015, p. 214). Similar to user-generated "paratexts and interconnected ephemera" such as fan fiction, internet memes add to the narrative world and "make meaning out of established media texts" (Geraghty, 2015, p. 1). Additionally, they proliferate the experience of and engagement with a series. Because of their "rich intertextuality" and "anomalous juxtaposition" of images, events, and topics, which contribute to their online success (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, pp. 213–216), memes put televisual content in conversation with other media, cultural phenomena, or societal issues and discourses.

The previously introduced taxonomy and subsequent discussion of examples from various shows (Figure 7) have revealed the progression of teleserial memefication: from a pre-internet (or even pre-digital) and intramedial process of revisualization to all-around transmedial practices of imitation, reenactment, and recreation. This ultimately raises questions about the sustainability of television and popular culture. Pre-internet and online memefications address recipients with a certain level of media and cultural-historical pre-knowledge that is a prerequisite for decoding these layered references. They also cultivate insider engagement with series and a shared understanding of certain cultural hallmarks and artistic milestones. TV revisualizations are an integral part of media circulation processes through which audiences gain aesthetic experience and stylistic competence (Adelmann, 2015, p. 105). Thus, televisuality becomes an ever-expanding database for remediation and memefication in personal, institutional, or commercial contexts. In addition to public posts on social media platforms like X, Instagram, or TikTok, TV memes reappear in private conversations among friends and family, serving as insider jokes or love languages in bilateral or closed group chats on messenger apps. WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram facilitate "memetic communication" through the integration of Giphy, a database of GIFs, as well as "stickers," meaning small cutouts of media figures, e.g., TV characters. With these shortcuts to animated meme material, teleserial elements smoothly insert themselves into everyday conversations. Subsequently, users may perceive the represented series as both "must-see-TV" and "must-tweet-TV" (Gormász, 2012), or in more general terms, "must-share-TV," which means that their reception extends beyond the silver screen to mobile and second

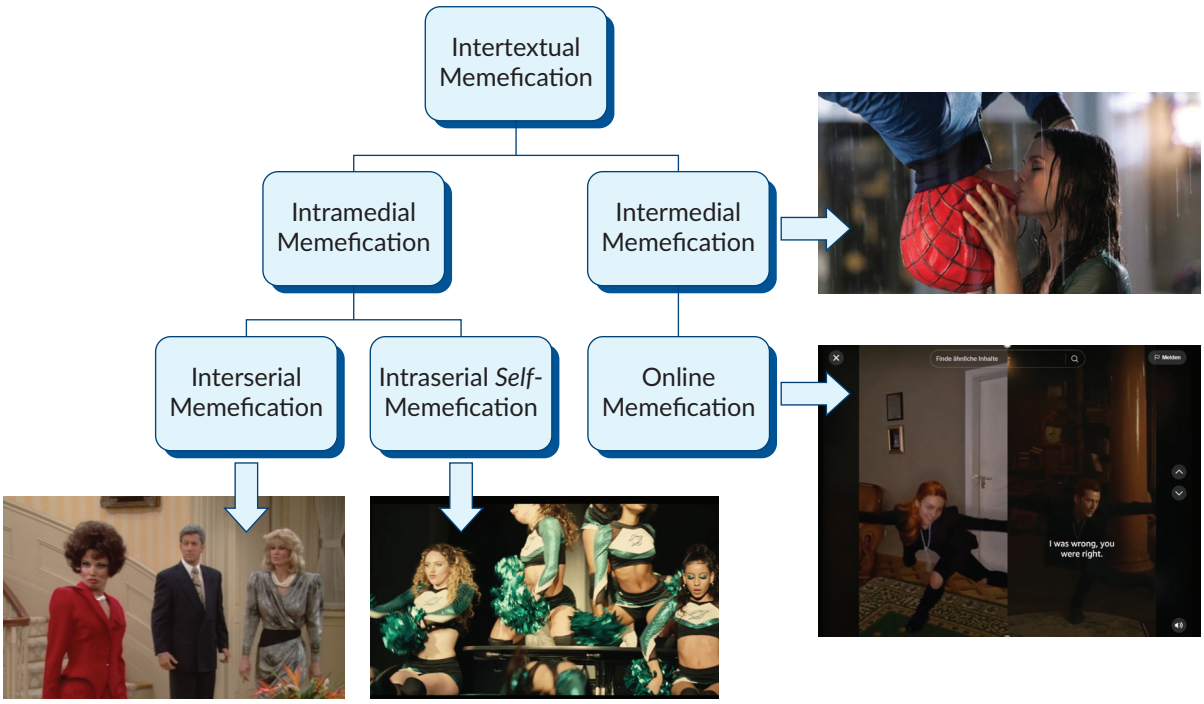

Figure 7. Taxonomy of memefication with examples from *Euphoria*, *Good Omens*, *The Nanny*, and *The O.C.*

screens. Through the interleaving of pre-internet and internet memefication, TV series, in their entirety, now occupy our leisure time and everyday media culture more holistically. Some may regain recognition and resonance with new audiences beyond fan groups and filter bubbles through incessant online memefication or viral spread. In any case, memefication lends new purpose to TV series. This purpose lies in the initiation of appropriation, remembrance, and reinterpretation processes, which ultimately continue the conversation around and consumption of media content.

5. Conclusion

Pre-internet memefication demonstrates televisuality's "natural" ability of meme production and distribution. In the digital media environment, internet memes from and of TV series contribute to the preservation of popular culture. As dynamic repositories of moving images, they result from the infrastructural and logistic transformation of cultural memory regarding storage, temporality, and networking (Thylstrup, 2018, p. 185). Digitization destabilizes the indexical connection between institutions of cultural memory, e.g., archives or museums, and their contents. In contemporary media ecosystems, these institutions are no longer central but only one of many nodes of cultural remembrance (Thylstrup, 2018, pp. 185, 190). Television is arguably one of these nodes, too, because it has consolidated itself over decades as "a central place where what becomes visible in our culture and how it becomes visible is defined" (Adelmann, 2015, p. 102). Its "devices" for recalling media imagery and narratives are televisuality and seriality. Through the "recycling" of visual motifs and styles, television stores memories of media products, aesthetics, and technologies, albeit temporarily and fleetingly. Consequently, the medium is a precursor to online platforms, and its programs, especially TV series, are models for digital reproductive formats like internet memes. Meanwhile, memes continuously develop new audiovisual forms, both offline and online, through which we collect, retrieve, and transform cultural memories. Thus, the intersection of teleserial revisualization and memefication, as

discussed in this article, provides a useful lens for (further) research into the remembrance and inheritance of cultural artifacts and audiovisual modes of representation. Through intermedial, interserial, and intraserial memefication, we can observe the self-sustaining processes of television in particular and popular culture in general.

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Conflict of Interests

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About the Authors

Jana Zündel is a postdoctoral researcher at the Research Group Configurations of Film at Goethe University Frankfurt. Her dissertation was published as *Fernsehserien im medienkulturellen Wandel* (2022). Jana Zündel was a research assistant in the Department of Media Studies at Bonn University (2017–2021) and a scholarship holder in the structured doctoral program of the Bonn Faculty of Arts (2018–2021) and the Goethe Research Academy for Early Career Researchers (2024–2025). Her research focuses on digital media cultures, meme studies, TV series, and streaming platforms.

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Easy to Snack—Hard to Digest? Strategies of Dis/Array in Streaming, Social Media, and Television

Kim Carina Hebben [1] and Christine Piepiorka [2]

[1] Division of Academic Teaching and Faculty Development, TU Dortmund University, Germany
[2] Department of Marketing and Digital Media, FOM University of Applied Sciences for Economics and Management, Germany

Correspondence: Kim Carina Hebben (kim.hebben@tu-dortmund.de)

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Abstract

In the digital age, the television landscape is profoundly expanded and dispersed across multiple media, introducing new paradigms of (post-)televisuality shaped by its constant digital transformation. Television content is distributed across digital platforms that fundamentally change its consumption practices. Through its fragmentation and digitization, television is breaking down into snippets—short, engaging pieces of media—that provide a dynamic, customizable, and "snackable" viewing experience, so that it is supposedly easy to digest. As a result, not only is there a shift in how content is viewed, but there is also a shift in how content is produced. Social media platforms and their algorithms have emerged as central to this transformation, facilitating the dissemination and discovery of television content in unprecedented ways. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok are not just venues for discussion and sharing but are also directly influencing the digital transformation of television. While specific essential characteristics define television (such as its seriality, scheduling, or formats), the digital transformation emerging from the internet is disrupting the medium and requiring (or even demanding) participatory modifications based on experimenting with different forms of media so that television gets expanded, explored, manipulated, and played with by consuming snackable content bit by bit. The concept of dis/array proposed in this article encapsulates the dual forces of fragmentation and reorganization. Disarray, characterized by the oversupply of content, reflects the challenges audiences face in navigating a dispersed landscape. Conversely, array represents the efforts by platforms and users to restore order through algorithms, categorization, and interactive engagement. By analyzing current trends and audience behaviors, this article reveals how streaming, social media, and snippets contribute to the transformation of television.

Keywords

array; disarray; fragmentation; memes; participation; snippet TV; social media; streaming; television; transformation

1. Introduction: TV's Ongoing Transformation

Television is an ongoing process. In the digital age, the television landscape is undergoing a period of expansion and diversification across multiple media platforms, giving rise to new paradigms of (post-)televisuality shaped by the constant digital transformation of the medium. The term "post-televisuality" can be viewed critically, given its long-standing usage to describe new manifestations of television and the resulting ambiguity surrounding its definition (Piepiorka & Hebben, 2024, pp. 34–35). The conventional arrangement of a solitary television set in the living room has been complemented by the emergence of streaming services on portable devices and even immersive technology, thereby demonstrating that television has consistently exhibited a capacity for reinvention. Even during its formative years, television demonstrated a capability to adapt to various changes. Initially utilized for the broadcasting of singular events, such as a theater performance (Williams, 1975/2002, p. 35), television has evolved into a substantial global supply of streaming and on-demand content. The multiplication of platforms, content, and consumption patterns has given rise to new requirements for consumers and producers, a subject that will be explored in this article.

Television has included the newest technologies and devices ever since its beginnings. The medium's transformations are often categorized into technological, institutional, and behavioral changes that affect each other. In the 1990s, Caldwell introduced a comprehensive approach that captures television as a heterogeneous object in its complexity while also identifying and focusing on its essence. In an effort to capture the attention of viewers, networks have sought to differentiate themselves through unique selling points in various aspects of their programming, including formats, aesthetics, and innovative technologies. This has resulted in a distinctive appearance of television, which Caldwell summarizes under the term "televisuality" (Caldwell, 1995/2002). This approach encompasses stylistic performance and aesthetics, as well as industrial production processes, program design, viewer perspective, and connections to economic and social affairs. The advent of televisuality can be attributed to the adaption of technological innovations and the evolution of television. It is, therefore, a manifestation of transformation. Similarly, Williams' (1975/2002) concept of "flow" emphasizes the processual nature of the developments that have shaped fundamental aspects of television, including its programming and seriality. Williams suggests that television programming is not perceived as discrete, standalone units (i.e., individual programs or episodes), but rather as a continuous, uninterrupted sequence of content, a flow of images, sounds, and narrative elements. This flow of content blurs the boundaries between different types of content, including entertainment, news, advertisements, and announcements, creating a seamless viewing experience for the audience. The concept of flow posits that television is not merely a compilation of discrete programs, but rather an uninterrupted stream of stimuli designed to maintain the viewer's attention over time. It is imperative to consider the technological advancements in broadcasting and media production to fully comprehend the reasons behind the emergence of seriality in television, as postulated by Williams. These developments gave rise to novel modes of narrative and audience engagement that were structurally aligned with the concept of flow. Williams uses the concept of flow to describe the interdependent relationship between the television experience and its programming, which is inextricably linked to institutional, economic, political, and technological structures (Williams, 1975/2002, p. 35). The concept of flow evolves from a linear, curated experience in traditional television to a decentralized, participatory, and algorithm-driven phenomenon in social media, reflecting the dynamic interplay of structure and user agency in the digital age. The personalized, interactive nature of social media flow creates a sense of agency and immediacy but also

fosters fragmentation and potential disorientation. Both concepts, televisuality and flow, originate from transient periods of change, defined by technological and social developments that have resulted in new demands and media practices. And yet, they are fundamental and consistent qualities of television that still apply, even in expanded television texts that converged into other media.

Therefore, Keilbach and Stauff (2011, pp. 156–174) propose a re-conceptualization of television as an ongoing experiment, with the objective of defining change and transformation as fundamental characteristics of the medium. The authors acknowledge the challenge of formulating a coherent definition of television, given the medium's inherent complexity, heterogeneity, and constant evolution. The authors challenge the assumption of a distinct identity of television, which is now perceived as heterogeneous and complex. This implies that there was once a distinct identity of television, whose stability is now faltering. Instead, they propose a different perspective, viewing the evolution of television as an inherent characteristic of the medium itself. The conceptualization of television as an ongoing experiment permits the consideration of its infinite potential for transformation, the examination of its practices, and the production of phenomena. The intricate interplay of elements and practices (theories, objects, and instruments) inherent to television is subject to a perpetual process of re-articulation, transformation, and reorientation. This dynamic process is driven by the objective of constantly introducing new possibilities and broadening television's theoretical and methodological discourse.

The interdependency between television and social media represents a key example of transformational processes that can be observed and analyzed. The concept of flow is a defining feature of television. At the same time, it transfers structures inherent to television to other areas, resulting in the expansion of television content beyond the traditional boundaries of the television screen. Streaming platforms and social media have emerged as significant platforms for viewing content, with these platforms also relying on features such as seriality. The distribution of television content across digital platforms has resulted in a fundamental shift in the manner in which it is consumed. Technological changes result in alterations to programs and structures, necessitating participatory modifications that rely on experimentation with various forms of media (Hebben, 2024, p. 268). Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok serve not only as forums for discourse and content sharing but also exert a direct influence on the digital transformation of television. Therefore, the meaning of television is currently debated in media and television studies. While scholars concur on the concept of "televisual seriality" (Grampp & Moskatova, 2025) as objective, its contents are disseminated across various platforms, including social media and streaming services, in addition to television networks and channels. While specific essential characteristics define television (such as its seriality, scheduling, or formats), the digital transformation emerging from the internet is disrupting the medium and requiring (or even demanding) participatory modifications based on experimenting with different forms of media so that television is expanded, explored, manipulated, and played with (Hebben, 2019, p. 57). Through its fragmentation and digitization, television is breaking down into snippets—short, engaging pieces of media—that provide a dynamic, customizable, and snackable viewing experience (Piepiorka & Hebben, 2024). Concurrently, conventional television features are being integrated into other forms of digital media. Television continues to shape how streaming services and social media platforms engage with users. Features like serialized narratives, live broadcasting, event-based releases, and ad integration are deeply rooted in television's legacy, demonstrating its enduring influence on the broader landscape of digital media as they are now common characteristics of streaming and social media platforms.

By analyzing current trends and audience behaviors, this article reveals how snippets, social media, and its digital and algorithm-driven practices contribute to the transformation of television. The fragmentation of television into snippets has redefined how audiences interact with content. This shift, driven by streaming platforms and algorithmic curation, emphasizes brevity and personalization, catering to disorientation and diminishing attention spans. However, the rise of snippets has disrupted traditional TV structures, creating a landscape marked by dis/array: a dynamic tension between order and fragmentation. This research aims to describe the interplay between array and disarray and how it underscores the transformative role of snippets in reshaping television consumption. While the oversupply of fragmented content fosters disorientation, platforms and audiences actively work to re-establish coherence through categorization, recommendations, and interactive strategies. The theoretical framework is derived from media studies, with a focus on television, as well as from academic and practice-oriented discussions of social media (marketing) in order to examine the phenomena from multiple perspectives. Recent case studies are used as descriptive elements to support the observations. These have been selected specifically in relation to the hypotheses and are therefore deliberately limited to the year 2024.

This article sets out to explore the following research questions:

> RQ1: How are streaming, social media, snippets, and the algorithms that underpin them, contributing to the transformation of television?
>
> RQ2: How do providers as well as consumers/users find orientation within a dis/array of content?
>
> RQ3: Are strategies of dis/array effects that emerge from dealing with fragmentation and snippets, and do they only occur through the interaction of television and social media?

2. Digitization and Dispersion: Plurality of Possibilities

The contemporary media environment is shaped by the concept of "media convergence" (Jenkins, 2006). Even prior to the advent of digital technologies and media, Williams (1975/2002) and Caldwell (1995/2002) described how the fundamental concepts of flow and televisuality emerged from processes of technological progress and change that were adapted by television. The advent of media convergence can be attributed to the technological convergence of individual, actually divergent media and, consequently, communication technologies caused by digitization. This results in a technological understanding of media convergence which in turn gives rise to changes in the technological and economic models that underpin it (Anderson, 2006, pp. 3–6). Jenkins (2006, p. 282) posits that media convergence represents an "ongoing process…between different media systems." He further characterizes the phenomenon of "convergence culture" which emerges from the integration of diverse media forms, extending the purely technical aspects to include communicative, social, and cultural dimensions. In this sense, televisuality encompasses aesthetics, industrial production processes, the viewer's perspective, and links to economic and social issues.

This enables a phenomenon that is not new and can be found above all in television and film: "transmediality." This term is composed of the Latin prefix *trans*, which stands for "over" or "through." Transmediality thus refers to a concept that takes place "across media" or "through media." This implies a coordinated interplay of different media and their utilization. Thus, the textual and narrative design is not

limited to the source medium, but the boundaries of media may be exceeded. As a result, narratives are designed in such a magnitude that they are retold in several media. These elements, depending on their specific medium, can be perceived successively and are not necessarily tied to the inherent temporality of the series, allowing the order in which individual fragments are experienced to be flexible. This results in a simultaneity of fragments and starting points for the development of different texts (Piepiorka, 2017, p. 75). Therefore, a transmedia television series can be understood as the "simultaneous presentation of fragments across different media contexts, offering a plurality of possibilities" that continuously expands (Olek & Piepiorka, 2012, p. 81).

This has resulted in the evolution of innovative storytelling techniques and audience engagement that are inextricably linked to the concept of flow. This concept underscores the continuous, evolving processes that have shaped key elements of television, emphasizing the fluid progression and continuity in storytelling and viewer interaction. Jenkins (2006) has argued that this development reinforces and describes a "participatory culture." In contrast to consumer culture, individuals are no longer just passive consumers, but rather active co-creators. This shift, particularly within the context of social media, which offers a relatively accessible platform for participation, has led to a proliferation of creative co-creation in various forms.

Developments such as convergence culture and transmediality and the current oversupply of content are also reshaping concepts of flow and televisuality and changing production and reception. These changes are due to a number of developments that go beyond the circumstances described above. They pave the way for a platformization and dispersion of content in so-called "snippets." Platformization (Stollfuß, 2023, pp. 12–16) describes the increasing influence of digital platforms on various social, economic, and cultural areas. In the context of streaming services, platformization refers to the way in which platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+, and other streaming services are changing the media landscape and access to content. In addition to the consequences of the monetization of platforms and content, the economic significance for the media landscape, exclusivity, and original productions, platformization has another salient meaning from the perspective of this article: the proliferation of algorithms and content. Streaming platforms utilize algorithms to curate content based on user preferences. Consequently, individual media consumption is heavily influenced by these platforms. These platforms function not only as distributors of content, but also as decision-makers, determining which content to highlight or recommend. This phenomenon bears a striking resemblance to that observed in social media platforms, which also utilize algorithms to deliver a customized user experience.

Both platform types are the basis for an oversupply that consists of small parts: Various developments in television, such as the fragmentation of the medium and the associated presentation of snackable content from television series, which can be ideally distributed via social media platforms, have led to the identification of new defining characteristics. Piepiorka and Hebben (2024) propose a new terminology, "snippet TV," to describe the changes in the television industry. They argue that traditional television is being transformed into a fragmented medium, with content divided into short, discrete segments, or "snippets." This, in turn, results in the fragmentation of the audience and a reception that is disseminated in short, fragmented parts. The term snippet is borrowed from marketing, which refers to a short textual representation of information on search engine results pages. A snippet highlights the uniqueness or value of the website and its offering, for example, through a promise, an outstanding deal, or special information (Ahrholdt et al., 2023, p. 27). For streaming providers, a short description of the content on the homepage or

social media is now essential to survive in the attention economy of this media environment and to generate enthusiasm for the content in a short time. Commercial media platforms establish a new form of communication, which is by snippets and therefore by "algorithmically prefigured information processes" (Stollfuß, 2019, p. 517). This term is also used in social media marketing: A "snippet" is a short text statement or an excerpt from a longer post or content that is shared on social networks. It can be observed that—both on the part of the users and the producers—a portion-appropriate production and reception in bites and snippets is relevant (Piepiorka & Hebben, 2024, pp. 39–42). Furthermore, the content behind these eye-catching elements is designed to be as easily digestible as a snack, requiring minimal effort to consume (Hagen & Münzer, 2019, p. 122). Snippets are often used to arouse curiosity and retain followers in the long term, reminiscent of Williams' description of the flow as a mode of reception (Williams, 1975/2002, p. 38). Ultimately, all TV and streaming providers strive to motivate their audience to watch and interact with their content. The focus here is on "snackable" content (Hagen & Münzer, 2019, p. 122)—content that is specially prepared for users with diminishing attention spans. One may anticipate that the saturation of cultural content on television will occur at an accelerated rate. The sheer volume of television content, including web-exclusive material from various channels and productions, makes it challenging to stay abreast of the rapidly evolving landscape. Moreover, the abundance of content has an impact on the capacity of individuals to maintain their attention (Einwächter & Jensen, 2024, p. 109). An emerging strategy to deal with this fragmentation and oversupply is to produce and consume content in smaller, easily digestible portions such as bites and snippets. Thus, the result is a parallel mass of content in which viewers and users have to find their way around (Piepiorka & Hebben, 2024, p. 41). As previously stated, the aforementioned concept is characterized by a plurality of possibilities that are continuously expanding, and which are received as snacks and bites. This inherent intricacy can result in modes of reception that are characterized by a state of disorientation: "To orientate oneself seems to be difficult both within and even outside the television frame. Complex television evokes a potentially disorienting narrative" (Piepiorka, 2013, p. 198). In addition to transmediality, digestibility and snackability contribute significantly to disorientation. Orientation can be a challenge both within and beyond the television screen.

3. Sorting out TV's Oversupply in the Digital Landscape

The advent of worldwide interconnectedness, coupled with the proliferation of transmedia programs, has given rise to a virtual space wherein the process of orientation becomes difficult. Orientation and disorientation appear to be inherent in all processes of engaging with the world through media. While these technologies facilitate broadening one's perspective and enhancing knowledge, they simultaneously present an augmented array of choices concerning subsequent actions, destinations, and explorations (Eckel et al., 2012, p. 11). In the domain of psychology, orientation refers to a mental function that involves the awareness of three key dimensions: time, place, and person/self (Baars & Gage, 2010, p. 257).

Piepiorka (2013, p. 184–204) has shed light on how this applies in particular to narratively complex narrative styles in series. An orientation guide here seems to be time, place, and characters that create a narrative network of information that is comprehensible through a series of perceptual and cognitive processes, ultimately resulting in a coherent story. Thus, causality within time and space, both of which are shaped by places, plays a central role, with characters acting as agents of causes and effects. Within the narration, this refers to televisuality, characters, story arcs, and time. Causality creates orientation. Conversely, a lack of causality creates disorientation. By establishing order within the elements of time, place, and characters, it is

possible to gain orientation through the process of causality. When assessing the narrative complexity of a series, it is imperative to consider not only the content presented within the series, but also the extensive amount of supplementary material available on social media and as snippets. In such cases, orientation becomes a pivotal factor. As previously outlined here and by Piepiorka and Hebben (2024), the dissemination of television content in fragmentary form described as snippets has resulted in the creation of disorientating structures which render navigation challenging, "thereby raising the question of how far media and (dis)orientation can be considered mutually dependent," and further, "how exactly do media technologies orient and disorient us?" (Eckel et al., 2012, p. 11).

Thus, the question emerges: How do viewers navigate the complex structures of dispersed television and the abundance of simultaneous content? It is evident that certain offers and strategies are employed, leading to orientation and order through a two-way causal relationship, originating from both the series producers and the audience. Despite the fact that series creators very consciously distribute snippets of the series for entertainment purposes, they offer forms of connection that lead back to the series and thus create causality. Consequently, viewers and fans endeavor to re-establish these to achieve orientation and establish order. These strategies for order and connection to overcome disarray and dispersion of content can be surmised from the examples that follow.

In the television and streaming landscape, an oversupply of content is developing, which relates to the large number of available television and online offerings that are accessible to viewers. This has various effects. On the one hand, users have access to an enormous variety of content. On the other hand, streaming providers are endeavoring to offer strategies to maintain an overview of this huge range. Algorithms and recommendations are used here (Piepiorka & Hebben, 2024, p. 40). Netflix's Instagram account provides an illustrative example of this approach, offering diagrams that demonstrate strategies and potential behaviors.

One such example of how networks and streaming platforms structure their dispersed and extensive content is assembling them by special occasions. These events may include release dates and new releases, ratings, genres, current trends, and internet phenomena (see Figures 4–7). Holidays and seasons are also considered (see Figure 1). The categories are used within the structure of the streaming platforms' apps, as advertisements within the platforms, and in their social media appearances. As illustrated in Figure 1, "summer vs autumn," Netflix's Instagram account provides a categorization that divides between summer and autumn. The illustrated flash and "versus" imply that there is a clash or competition, which enables engagement in the comment section and to vote on which season and shows the audience prefers. Furthermore, it combines and recommends different shows and genres. The shows presented range from current releases, e.g., *The Perfect Couple* (Bier et al., 2024) or *Emily in Paris* (Fleming et al., 2020–present) to shows that ended 17 years ago like *Gilmore Girls* (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000–2007).

To have widespread access to dispersed content, users are forced to subscribe to multiple services, making it difficult to choose as there are endless options for content selection—creating a paradox of choice (Gasteier, 2017, p. 512) on the one hand and a phenomenon known as "series fatigue" (Einwächter & Jensen, 2024) on the other. In order to navigate the evolving media landscape, audiences must develop new strategies for engaging with the changing structures of media consumption. This necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the vast array of media sources, which can be challenging given the high level of fragmentation and the excessive amount of content available (Piepiorka & Hebben, 2024, p. 45).

Figure 1. Summer vs autumn. Source: Netflix DE (2024b).

By categorizing its "extensive library of feature films, documentaries, TV shows, anime, award-winning Netflix originals, and more" (Netflix, n.d.) and showcasing a curated selection of summer and autumn-themed shows on Instagram, Netflix pre-selects and recommends content, similar to a must-watch list.

Figure 2 exemplifies an attempt to transfer a series that was completed 17 years ago into the contemporary discourse of television series. Despite the continuation of the series in 2016 as a four-episode special on Netflix, the images selected in Figure 2 are from the original series which ran until 2007. The fan-made illustration demonstrates the potential outcome "if rory had instagram…" (Gimme More Gilmore, 2024) and what her account would look like. A number of noteworthy observations can be made. Firstly, it demonstrates the dissemination of series fragments across the digital content space of social media. Additionally, it showcases the updating and appropriation of contemporary discourses that were not present in the original *Gilmore Girls* series (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000–2007). At the same time, it facilitates identification with the characters, thereby enabling an immersive engagement with the show's narrative universe. These fragments are linked back to the main text of the series, which can be accessed via reruns on television, DVD box sets, or streaming platforms such as Netflix. The snippets are characterized by their ease of consumption and the ability to be engaged in short, uninterrupted sequences. Thus, they invite viewers to rewatch the series and show a recursiveness that links back to the original text of the series and simultaneously enables an even broader spectrum of participation (Hebben, 2024, p. 272). In general, recursiveness can refer to self-referential reasoning or circular logic. It involves the repetition or looping of a process in a self-similar or self-referential manner, allowing complex patterns and behaviors to arise from straightforward rules (Hofstadter, 1979). Thus, here and in the following examples recursiveness can be described as an organizing strategy of producers, streamers, and audiences insofar as snippets are looped or linked to the actual text by all involved and thus enable orientation within an environment of disarray. Several posts on Instagram show similar strategies of categorization, participation, and updating, e.g., the adaptation of the series characters into AI-generated worlds, reminiscent of rewriting the story as a form of fan fiction. Other examples are references to current trends such as TikTok or films, for instance, a comparison of the protagonists of *Gilmore Girls* (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000–2007) with characters from the Disney film *Inside Out 2* (Mann, 2024).

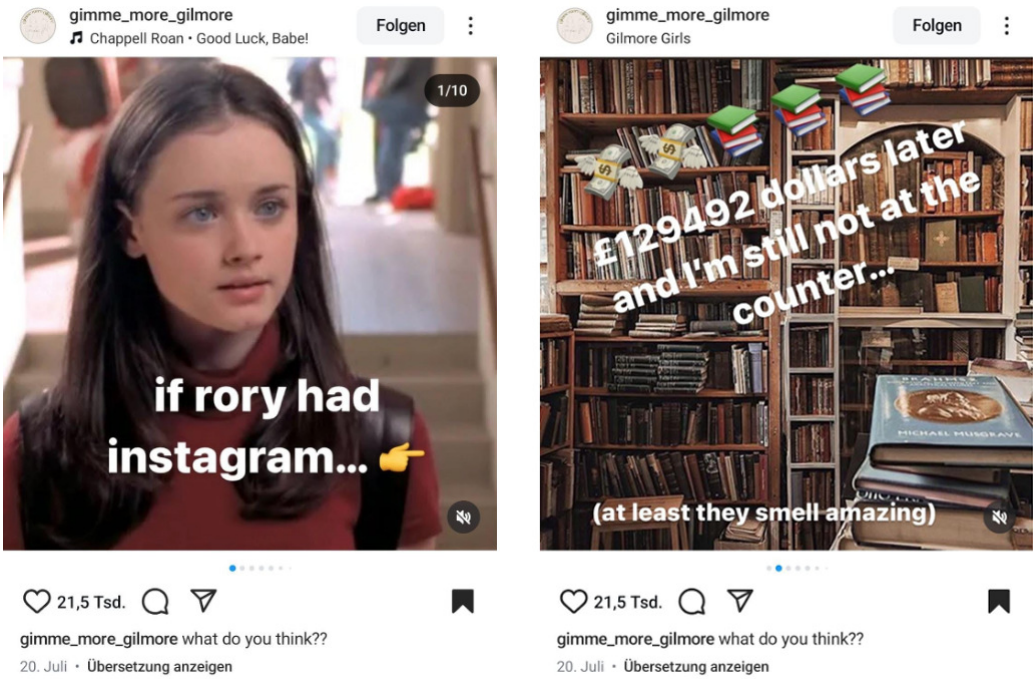

Figure 2. If rory had instagram. Source: Gimme More Gilmore (2024).

The example presented in Figure 3 illustrates a direct link to the original organizational structure of the television series *Gilmore Girls* (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000–2007), comprising its seasons and episodes. In a post on the image-sharing platform Instagram, a *Gilmore Girls* fansite prompts its followers to "describe your favorite Gilmore Girls episodes using emojis" (Gilmore Girls Fan Page, 2024). This encourages users to engage with familiar classification systems, demonstrating a high level of commitment and participation. Not only do users post their favorite episodes as emojis, but they also engage in guessing and discussing about these episodes. They categorize the episodes according to seasons and episodes, which leads them back to the original text with a recursive movement (Hebben, 2024, p. 272) and invites them to rewatch. This shows that strategies of dis/array emerge from dealing with fragmentation and snippets.

Another example that shows not only the challenge of sorting a high level of fragmentation and the excessive amount of content of one series but a high level of several layers of popular references on top of the series content, emerges from the so-called "demure trend." The demure trend on TikTok began in August 2024 when influencer Jools Lebron (2024) shared a video describing her understated makeup look for work as "very demure, very mindful." The term "demure" traditionally means modest or reserved, but the trend emphasizes a natural, mindful presentation that combines confidence and style. Users on TikTok show how to "demure" everyday activities, linking the trend to themes such as "quiet luxury" and minimalist elegance (Swift, 2024). The audio track of the original video is repurposed as an audio meme and distributed with one's own video content. Memes as a cultural practice of the internet are also increasingly being used by content providers. According to Shifman (2013) memes are: "A group of digital elements with common characteristics in terms of content, form, and attitude, created, circulated, imitated and modified with awareness of each other" (Shifman, 2013, p. 41). Memes have the capacity to engender novel affects, meanings, relevance, and knowledge through random connections and similarities in the socially fragmented and attention-driven "splinternet" (Mücke et al., 2022, p. 11). Consequently, they reflect fragmentation and

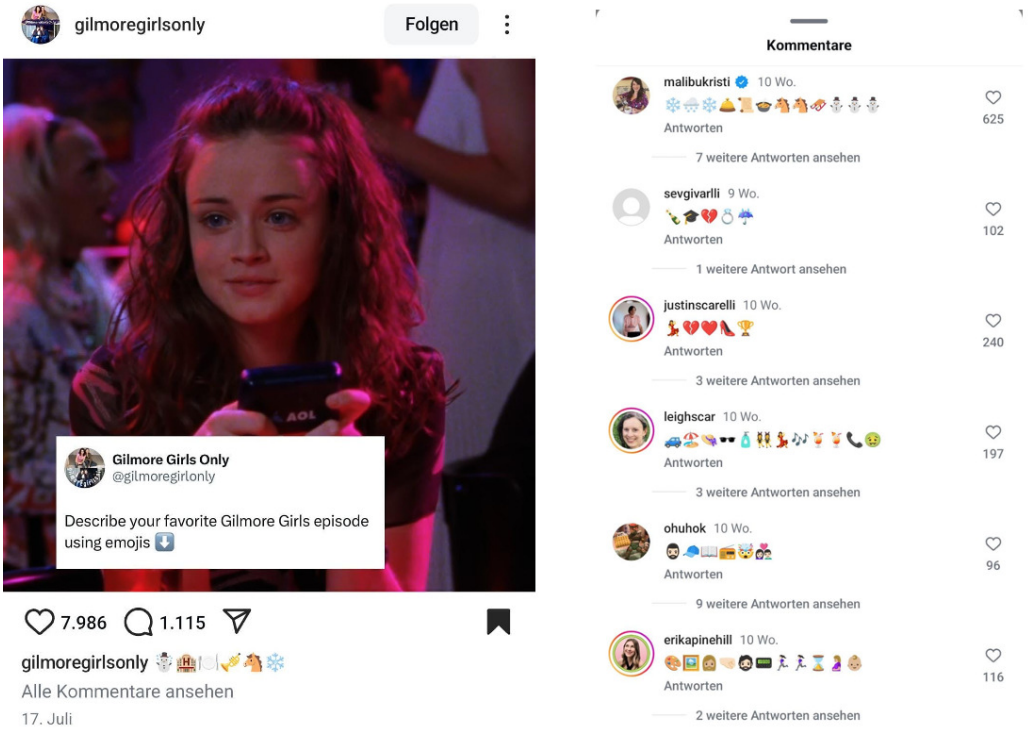

Figure 3. Describe your favorite Gilmore Girls episode using emojis. Source: Gilmore Girls Fan Page (2024).

often manifest in the form of brief, attention-grabbing snippets that convey content in a condensed image–text combination. Providers are increasingly resorting to memes or producing content that is deliberately designed for memeability. As Zündel (2022) notes in the context of the series *Euphoria* (Levinson et al., 2019–present), television and streaming series deliberately incorporate or even anticipate the creation of memes from the outset. Comprehension of these memes necessitates awareness of the original or active engagement within the relevant social media bubbles. Television providers strategically appeal to viewers' desire to always be up to date, thereby transforming television into a daily, habitual practice of self-obligation (Zündel, 2023).

Additionally, actor Penn Badgley makes a direct reference to the demure meme, associating the television series *You* (Siega et al., 2020–2023) with the TikTok trend (see Figure 4). He produces a video from the set of the series and shows how demure he behaves there, which was posted by Netflix (Netflix US, 2024b). This establishes a correlation between the Netflix-produced series, the streaming provider itself, and the TikTok trend. In response to this trend, Netflix has strategically partnered with the creator of the original video content. A "very demure, very mindful" category (see Figure 5) is being created on the streaming platform, in which series on this topic are offered (Netflix US, 2024c). The demure meme as a snippet exerts a direct influence on the platform's organization, thereby contributing to the transformation of the streaming provider. Furthermore, Netflix leverages this trend on its Instagram account, positioning series between the "demure" category and the preceding TikTok trend "brat," which epitomizes loud, self-confident, and direct behavior (see Figure 6). This approach mirrors the aforementioned seasonal meme (see Figure 1) as a means of categorization and preselection. This highlights the intricate interplay of multiple layers of popular cultural references that serve to orient users and consumers: The contemporary implications of the term "brat," which also serves as the title of a recent album by British singer Charli XCX with a neon green color on its

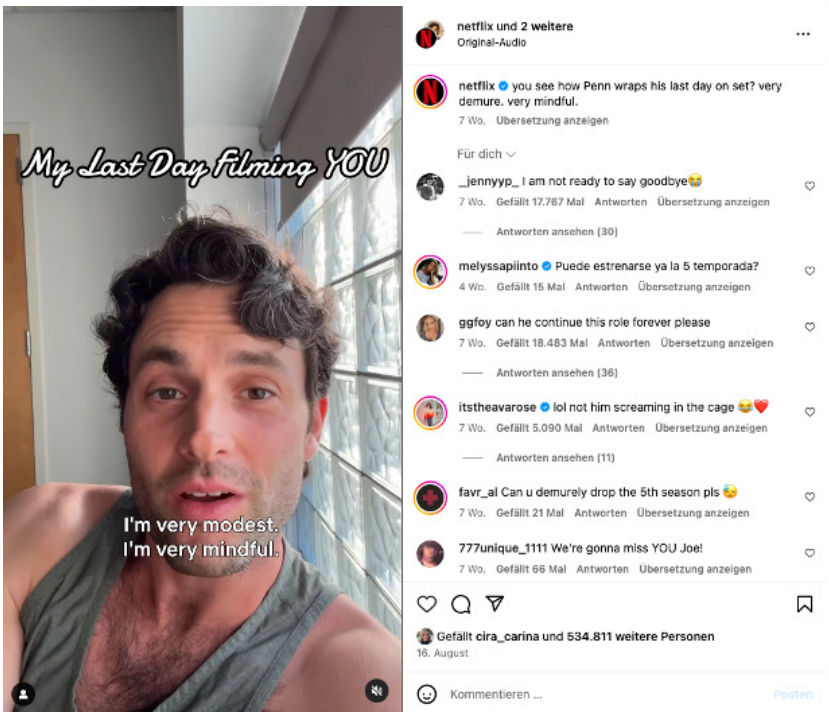

Figure 4. My last day filming *You*. Source: Netflix US (2024b).

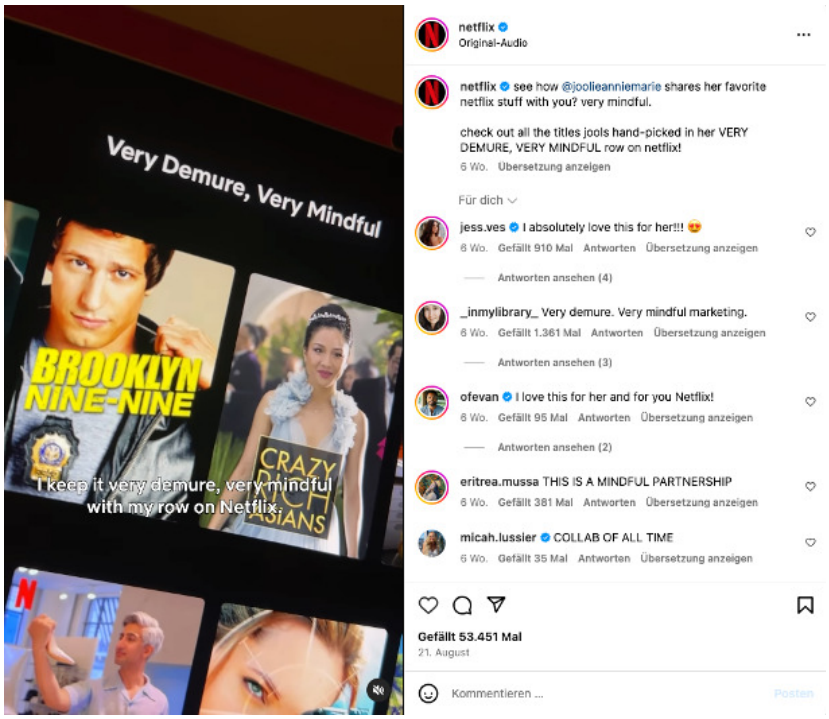

Figure 5. Very demure, very mindful category on Netflix. Source: Netflix US (2024c).

cover, is encoded in the lime green color trend when users began using the color in their profile pictures and creating memes with it. Both the color and the term “brat” have been referenced in the 2024 US election campaign, when Kamala Harris’ campaign went lime green to embrace the meme of the summer

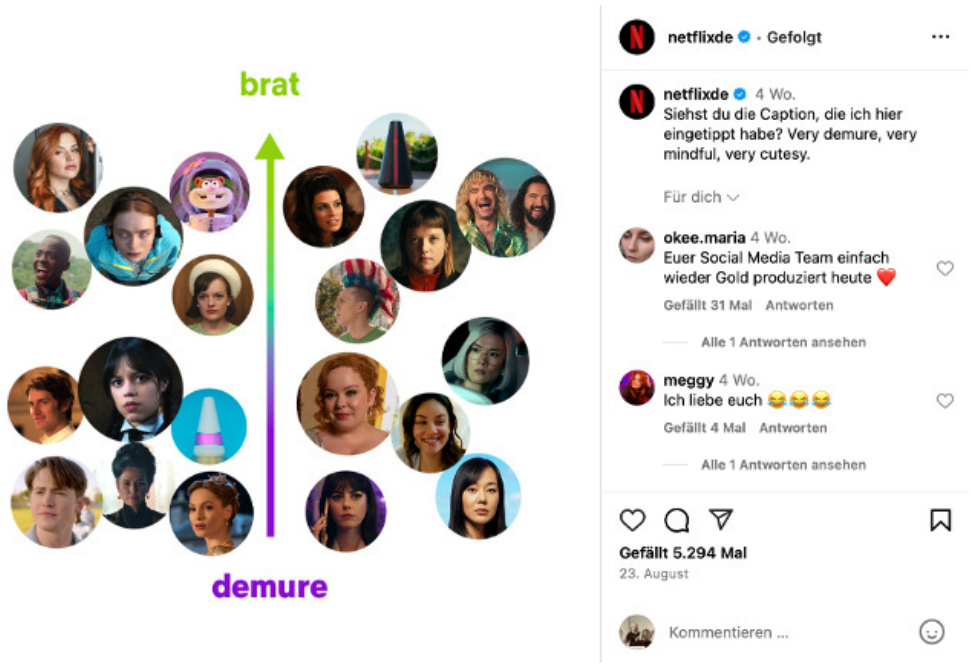

Figure 6. Demure to brat. Source: Netflix DE (2024a).

(Demopoulos, 2023). This raises the question: How do categorizations facilitate viewer orientation while simultaneously leveraging the audience's familiarity with specific social media trends as a prerequisite for engagement? The answer to this question is twofold. Firstly, the sheer volume of content can be challenging to process. However, by employing strategies similar to those utilized by consumers, providers, and evolving popular culture, navigation becomes more manageable. This awareness of trends and popular cultural references becomes particularly evident in emerging memes, as the next example clearly demonstrates.

The last example shows that these suggestions for different forms of organization and arrangement are being accepted and expanded upon. The boundaries between fan-produced and platform-produced snippets are blurring. Videos using the word "demure" appear in the social media content space. One such example is a clip from the 1993–1999 television series *The Nanny* (Jacobson et al., 1993–1999). It is unlikely that the quote from protagonist Fran Dresher and TikTok creator Jools are related. Nevertheless, both videos have been collated in a manner akin to the assembly of a mosaic (Piepiorka & Hebben, 2024, p. 51) within the social media content space, with a connection sought and an order enforced. Netflix extends this line of reasoning by identifying and reinforcing the perceived connection between the TikTok meme and television. Additionally, the term "demure" is referenced in a prominent manner within the context of a particular scene (see Figure 7) situated within the 153-episode narrative of the television series *Gilmore Girls* (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000–2007). The scene, which is brief, is currently being disseminated via the internet as a short clip. Concurrently, Netflix has reposted the meme on their Instagram account. This act of homage functions to reinforce the perceived order of the fan-produced snippets, while simultaneously establishing a direct link between the TikTok trend "demure" and the television series *Gilmore Girls*. This illustrates the recursive movement of such content between social media and television platforms along with the process of organization to establish array.

Figure 7. The demure trend in *Gilmore Girls*. Source: Netflix US (2024a).

4. Conclusion: Navigating the Dynamics of Dis/Array in the Transformation Of TV

This analysis highlights how the fragmentation of television into snippets and its integration with social media platforms have fundamentally reshaped the medium. It is evident that social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok function not only as forums for discourse and interaction but also exert a direct impact on the digital transformation of television. These platforms mirror the increasingly fragmented and expanded media landscape, reflecting the ongoing transformation processes. Television represents a paradigmatic case of continuous technological change, which is invariably accompanied by the adaption of new media practices. Concurrently, the fundamental attributes of television, such as its flow and televisuality, are contingent upon the evolution of the medium, which in turn gives rise to modified practices and paradigms. One consequence of the transformation of televisuality is the emergence of transformed forms and modes of media convergence and transmediality. These not only facilitate the platformization of television but also prompt further changes in practices and formats. It is produced, distributed, and received in bites and snippets.

The concept of dis/array, which is central to this analysis, encapsulates the dual forces of fragmentation and reorganization. Disarray, defined by the overwhelming oversupply of content, reflects the challenges audiences face in navigating a dispersed landscape. Conversely, array signifies the endeavors by platforms and users to reestablish order through the implementation of algorithms, categorization, and interactive engagement. In response to the challenges posed by the deluge of options and the disarray of content, novel practices are emerging to establish a revised meaning of orientation. The intertwined and mutually reinforcing nature of array and disarray is a salient feature of this dynamic landscape.

On the one hand, algorithms are an inherent strategy of the digital world, which is used by streaming platforms and social media networks for personalized consumption. Furthermore, algorithms facilitate the dissemination of TV series fragments, which are then rearranged, updated, or manipulated in the form of memes. This perpetuates inherent characteristics of television such as seriality with its structure of variation and repetition. At the same time, the algorithms curate the content and thus influence the user's attention. The viewer is confronted with an overwhelming array of options and information, coupled with a high degree of control through pre-selection. What appears to be easily digestible content actually requires a variety of strategies in order to be fully and causally received.

In addition to seasons and episodes, narrative elements such as time, places, and characters, which contribute to the establishment of causality, constitute an established organizational structure. The interplay between formal and narrative structures is evident in the examples presented. On the one hand, the snippets are linked back to the original text of the series and to the broadcasters and streaming platforms, as Mittell (2015) has already described in the context of transmedia storytelling in the series *Lost* (Abrams et al., 2004–2010). Conversely, the characters and narrative elements are continued in the snippets and adapted to align with contemporary discourses. This phenomenon also fosters forms of immersion and role-playing, as evidenced by Figure 2. An active search for order is evident when, for example, individual fragments such as the word "demure" are searched for and categorized in a television context. This process culminates in a convergence of fan-produced and official content. These examples elucidate strategies of categorization, participation, and the appropriation of prevailing discourses. These categorizations ultimately lead back to the platforms and broadcasters in a recursive movement, inviting participation in the texts, for example in the form of re-watching. The dynamic interplay between these platforms, the series content, and the reception practices of the audience collectively define the contemporary transformations of television. This phenomenon is exemplified by the multi-layered forms and practices of dis/array.

This study reaffirms television's adaptability and enduring influence, even as its boundaries blur within a converged media environment. By examining how snippets and social media contribute to this evolution, the analysis underscores television's capacity for reinvention, maintaining relevance in a rapidly changing digital world.

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About the Authors

Kim Carina Hebben is pursuing her doctorate in media studies at Ruhr University Bochum, with her research focusing on the playful structures and practices inherent to television. Concurrently, she is employed as a research assistant at the Division of Academic Teaching and Faculty Development at TU Dortmund University.

Christine Piepiorka (PhD) is a professor for marketing and digital media at FOM University of Applied Sciences for Economics and Management Dortmund. She has a PhD in media studies at Ruhr University Bochum. Since 2022, she has been the spokesperson for the television working group AG Fernsehen of the Society for Media Studies (GfM).

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ARTICLE

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Producing Diversity: On the Discourses at the Heart of Netflix's Production Culture

Axelle Asmar [1], Tim Raats [1], and Leo Van Audenhove [1,2]

[1] imec-SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium
[2] CoLab for eInclusion and Social Innovation, University of the Western Cape, South Africa

Correspondence: Axelle Asmar (axelle.asmar@vub.be)

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Abstract

This article critically explores Netflix's use of diversity as a strategic tool within its global production culture; it focuses on how the streamer increasingly deploys various narratives about diversity and inclusion to legitimate its presence, rationalize its operations, and normalize the industrial changes it generates. Through a critical discourse analysis of Netflix's corporate communication—press releases and diversity reports published between June 2022 and February 2024—the study identifies four central discourses that shape Netflix's approach. These discourses reveal that while Netflix positions itself as a socially responsible actor championing diversity and inclusion, its strategy intertwines cultural values with commercial imperatives. By appealing to local talents worldwide, Netflix's rhetoric not only opens opportunities for underrepresented voices but also risks simplifying complex local identities to fit global market demands. The article concludes that Netflix's approach to diversity, while progressive on the surface, may in practice constrain creative autonomy, subtly reinforcing existing global power structures and shaping diversity through a commercial lens.

Keywords

diversity; inclusion; media production; Netflix; power; production culture; SVODs; television

1. Introduction

Subscription-video-on-demand services (SVODs) have significantly (re)shaped audiovisual cultures and introduced new ways of funding television content (Afilipoaie et al., 2021). The emergence of these new players has stimulated debates about their disruptive impact on production practices and norms (Idiz, 2024; Rasmussen, 2024). Describing itself early on as the "future of television" (Tryon, 2015), Netflix is one of the

most successful SVODs due to, on the one hand, its subscriber base and its near-global availability; on the other hand, Netflix has developed a distinctive production culture or singular norms, values, and practices (Mayer et al., 2009) which inform how its content is produced and distributed. This in turn allows the streamer to gain international recognition while appealing to local audiences and talents.

A central element of this production culture seems to be Netflix's diversity strategy, that is its growing emphasis on the representation and inclusion of categories of differences (i.e., gender, race, etc.) in Netflix's communication and programming (Asmar et al., 2023). After the publication of its first diversity report, the streamer has claimed anew its commitment to diversity and inclusion within the global television industry, notably by assisting and financing (local) talents and industries around the world (Sarandos, 2021). We argue that Netflix's diversity strategy is more than mere corporate tactics to brand the service and retain subscribers; rather, this rhetoric is increasingly used by the streamer as a strategy of distinction to appeal to (young) talents—particularly from marginalized communities—while consolidating its grip on (local) productions. Therefore, this contribution asks: How does Netflix rhetorically use its diversity strategy to appeal to talents and industries worldwide?

The aim of this study is not just to signal the economic power of Netflix as a producer and distributor of content; more importantly, we put an emphasis on the cultural power attached to being the grand weaver of stories. Most analyses of Netflix's power view the streamer from a dichotomous position: either as a "friend" providing new opportunities and financing for struggling industries (Straubhaar et al., 2021); or a "foe" threatening the balance of fragile media ecosystems through its aggressive acquisition and production strategies (Albornoz & Leiva, 2021). This article provides a novel perspective on the interplay between cultural power and production practices. While much of existing research has focused on economic and political mechanisms through which global streamers shape media ecosystems, this contribution examines how SVODs such as Netflix increasingly deploy various narratives about diversity and inclusion to legitimize their presence, rationalize their operations, and normalize the industrial changes they generate.

Hence, adding to current explorations of SVODs, this article provides a textured approach to exploring how the discursive use of cultural diversity and inclusion, particularly at the level of production, illustrates specific mechanisms of power. This article, building on and expanding previous research (Asmar et al., 2023), is based on a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Netflix's press releases and diversity reports published between June 2022 and February 2024. Following Caldwell (2006), we acknowledge that understanding production cultures in the streaming era also requires looking at their corporate texts to explore the variety of registers and paradigms used by SVODs to consolidate their practices. These corporate narratives are central to the economic and cultural power of streamers such as Netflix, working to provide the rhetorical frames through which the streamer validates its transnational position. This investigation, setting itself at the confluence between media industry research (Herbert et al., 2020) and production studies (Mayer et al., 2009), outlines four key discourses strategically used by Netflix in its corporate communication to appeal to talents and industries worldwide.

The following sections are structured as follows: first, we discuss the concept of power and its various conceptualizations (Section 2.1); second, based on these different approaches, we capture the multifaceted ways in which Netflix operates as a transformative force (Section 2.2) to finally consider how Netflix shapes global narratives around diversity (Section 2.3).

2. Netflix: A New Imperial Power?

2.1. Power: A Contested Concept

Initially founded in the US, Netflix is one of the first SVODs to have internationalized its streaming service (Lobato, 2019). Among the various discussions about Netflix's transnationalisation, the concept of power is a recurring feature. Most common formulations of power make a distinction between:

1. "Power over" which represents a traditional understanding of power as domination, control, and coercion. It is the capacity to impose one's will over another's, which is characteristic of authoritarian and hierarchical relations.
2. "Power to" which refers to empowerment and agency rather than coercion and domination. It is the ability of an individual or group to achieve something and bring about desired outcomes.
3. "Power with" which relates to collaboration whereby power emerges through collective action.

Hence, the concept of power is contested because power is not a single entity; rather, it embodies a cluster of concepts with overlapping characteristics. Many modern theorists have developed conceptualizations that blend these three formulations to show the multifaceted dimensions of such a concept. Michel Foucault (1980, 1993), one of the prime theorists of power, destabilizes the notion that power is only repressive; instead, he argues that power is productive, creating possibilities for action and resistance. Importantly, Foucault's theory places a heavy emphasis on discourses: the ways in which knowledge, language, and practices shape what is considered true, normal, or acceptable. Likewise, rejecting the idea of power as mere coercion, Pierre Bourdieu (2014) introduces the concept of symbolic power to highlight how power operates indirectly and subtly, often through cultural, social, and symbolic forms that seem natural and legitimate. Unlike traditional theories, Bourdieu focuses on how power is reproduced through everyday practices, beliefs, and institutions in ways that are often invisible to those involved. Both conceptualizations are closely linked to what Joseph Nye (1990, 2021) terms soft power or a nation's ability to make certain ideas, values, or practices seem attractive to others, and the capacity to create legitimacy. Creating legitimacy is one of the ways in which culture is seen by modern theorists as a mechanism of power (Clegg & Haugaard, 2013). Focusing both on media, Manuel Castells (2009) and Nick Couldry (2001) for instance engage with the complexities of power in the networked, media-driven world, emphasizing, on the one hand, the role of communication technologies and media conglomerates in shaping public discourses and societal power structures (Castells, 2009), and, on the other hand, the power of media to frame social reality, produce narratives that reinforce power structures, and shape what is seen as legitimate (Couldry, 2001).

Taking the perspective of media industries, Janet Wasko (2019) examines how power is held, exercised, and legitimated. Drawing on the aforementioned insights developed by theorists of power, she outlines three main dimensions of power necessary to understand how media companies "facilitate the material coordination of flows of information, communication and culture" (Wasko, 2019, p. 73). We thus use Wasko's (2019) typology to conceptualize the various aspects of Netflix's power, since this classification (a) is designed to understand media players such as Netflix, and (b) integrates the salient discussions on power which lay the theoretical foundations of this contribution.

2.2. Conceptualizing Netflix's Power

Wasko (2019) distinguishes between three dimensions of power:

1. Economic power that is divided between internal levels (the company's ownership of the various factors necessary for the flows of communication) and external levels (the regulatory environment in which a company operates).
2. Political power with corporations that can be seen as aligning with the political actors in power or, in contrast, antagonist to the powers in place.
3. Cultural power which, applied to television, refers to the capacity of media corporations to shape narratives and influence global audiences.

When looking at Netflix through the prism of economic power, most scholarship apply a "power over" frame. These debates stress Netflix's systemic impact on the financially weaker and smaller-scaled competitors; they put an emphasis on the streamer's ability to produce and distribute (local) content globally, often at the expense of local television industries, which reinforces its dominant position (Davis, 2021). In fact, Netflix has adapted its production strategy notably through the production of original content, that is stories commissioned and/or fully financed by the streamer (Afilipoaie et al., 2021). This strategy is emblematic of Netflix's discourses of distinction (Tryon, 2015) aimed at differentiating the streamer from the competition by privileging original productions with critically acclaimed talents. Yet, these series also signal what Gillian Doyle calls "big statement programs" (Doyle, 2016, p. 635): the increasing use of large budgets to establish distinctive market positions and attract new subscribers. A second element of Netflix's production strategy is the production of local original content. To counter the lack of local content in its catalogues, Netflix has bolstered its slate of local originals, becoming in some regions the largest commissioner of scripted content (*CSI Magazine*, 2021). To this end, the streamer has developed strategic partnerships in different countries, establishing collaborations with public broadcasters (D'Arma et al., 2021; Sundet, 2021), local, and/or independent production companies (Kim, 2022; Meimaridis et al., 2020) from South Korea to Brazil, stressing thus the geographic and linguistic diversity of the service. These changes have, at times, positioned Netflix as a force for good since the streamer has been associated with enhancing the visibility and quality of domestic content with strong global appeal (Bouquillion & Ithurbide, 2021; Simon, 2024). However, issues of diversity in Netflix's catalogues have highlighted the sharp inclination toward American content in its programming and the consistent preference for large markets with strong linguistic and/or geographic proximity (Albornoz & Leiva, 2021; Iordache, 2022).

Analyses of Netflix through the prism of political power also tend to apply a "power over" frame, applying the concept of soft power (Nye, 2021) to explore the streamer's capacity to leverage its resources to influence political decisions. Within this frame, Netflix is viewed as a political organization engaging in domestic and global struggles over ideological and technological power. Evan Elkins (2021), looking at the North American context, argues that Netflix promotes a broad vision of cultural and economic liberalism geared towards the construction of a cosmopolitan brand with an emphasis on technological disruption and economic deregulation. This, Elkins (2021) argues, encourages imperialist practices while Netflix's cosmopolitan branding paints the streamer as a progressive actor. Likewise in South America, Fernandes and Albornoz (2023) show how Netflix has grown into an influential policy actor capable of pressuring audiovisual policy debates. They particularly highlight the streamer's attempts to legitimize its presence in

the region through (a) its increasing demand for local content, (b) its partnerships with a wide range of public and/or civil institutions, and (c) the promotion of the streamer as a vector of inclusion and diversity for which regulation is unnecessary. This political power is also critically examined in the Middle East and North Africa region where Netflix's power is intertwined with state authority. Bulut (2025) and Khalil and Zayani (2021) stress how Netflix has developed a symbiotic relationship with some states whereby governments implement censorship laws, and the streamer complies to maintain access to lucrative markets. This balancing act often challenges Netflix's commitment to diversity and representation when its commercial interests are concerned.

This emphasis on diversity and inclusion is indeed a core aspect of analyses of Netflix through the lens of cultural power. Within such scholarship the three formulations of power—over, with, to—usually merge as Netflix is perceived as simultaneously dictating the narratives and representations that dominate public discourse (Meimaridis et al., 2024); yet also amplifying diverse voices and perspectives (Treadwell, 2022) while enabling individuals and communities to challenge dominant narratives (del Río & Moran, 2020). Recent research (Asmar et al., 2023, 2024a) shows that, as Netflix balances its global dimension with its local ambitions, diversity—or the emphasis on the representation and inclusion of various categories of differences—becomes a key tool of transnational expansion. It allows the streamer to support the global production and circulation of its texts across cultural boundaries while cementing its presence at the local level by appealing to the distinctive preferences of local television markets.

2.3. Diversity Settles in at Netflix

Since the publication of its first diversity report (Sarandos, 2021) and its subsequent update (Myers, 2023), Netflix has increasingly linked its brand to the concept of diversity and inclusion. This emphasis on inclusion is first evident through the streamer's promotion of some of its signature shows. From the multiracial cast of *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan & Herrman, 2013–2019), to the pronounced social commentary of titles such as *Dear White People* (Simien et al., 2017–2021), Netflix has doubled down on the promotion of programming that bypasses mere taste communities (Hallinan & Striphas, 2014) to target communities of conversation (Asmar et al., 2024b). Indeed, the streamer keenly plays on salient cultural conversations—from sexual violence to racism—connecting audiences not necessarily through common tastes, but through shared cultural/identity politics. Second, this diversity strategy is noticeable through Netflix's significant promotion of the service as a home for creative talents and innovative storytelling. To acquire and retain (local) talents, the streamer increasingly positions itself as a creative partner encouraging new and unexpected forms of storytelling (Tryon, 2015). Furthermore, the streamer has also capitalized on partnerships with established talents from marginalized communities—from Ava Duvernay to Ryan Murphy—emphasizing off-screen diversity as a prerequisite for great storytelling and innovation as Netflix grows globally (Myers, 2023).

This use of diversity to further global expansion—which Mareike Jenner (2023) calls grammar of transnationalism—highlights Netflix's particular approach to content production based on a somewhat precarious balance between global appeal and local specificity. Specifically, by emphasizing its diversity strategy in its promotion, production, and distribution, Netflix appeals to a transnational system of values (Jenner, 2023) or the set of experiences and ideals (i.e., feminism, anti-racism, etc.) that define our global culture. This allows Netflix to establish itself as a transnational service, integrating itself into national media industries while remaining a distinctly global service. Delving deeper into the operationalizations of

Jenner's (2023) concept, Asmar et al. (2023) examine Netflix's strategic use of diversity in its branding, highlighting four main strategies:

1. A strategy of differentiation in which diversity and inclusion are used by Netflix to gain competitive advantages and distinguish the service from the competition.
2. A strategy of indigenization which refers to Netflix's emphasis on geographic and linguistic diversity to localize its content and expand its subscriber base.
3. A strategy of representation in which diversity and inclusion become key markers of Netflix's content to increase engagement and loyalty among viewers from various cultural backgrounds, especially young audiences.
4. A strategy of cosmopolitanism which refers to the ways in which Netflix uses the diversity of its content and global audiences to promote itself as a vehicle of tolerance and empathy.

Expanding on these strategies, this study explores the discourses attached to each of them and salient in Netflix's communication about its production culture. We contend that current analyses of production, while yielding valuable results, seldom examine how SVODs such as Netflix narrativize themselves, thus producing and circulating (new) meanings about diversity and inclusion within media industries.

3. Methodology

The contribution investigates Netflix's strategic use of cultural diversity as a mechanism of cultural power through a critical examination of the streamer's rhetoric about its production culture. To this end, this article is based on a CDA of Netflix's corporate communication via its press releases and diversity reports publicly available on the Netflix newsroom website. CDA brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language studies and contributes to understanding the relationships between discourse and other social elements such as power relations or ideologies (Fairclough, 2013). Discourse refers to practices of talking or writing which bring objects into being through the production, dissemination, and consumption of texts (i.e., company statements, pictures, etc.). As such CDA seeks to link different levels of analysis: the text (micro) with the underlying power structures (macro) through the discursive practices on which the text is based (meso). In practice, while it is acknowledged that CDA encompasses a range of approaches rather than a unitary methodological framework, some key principles apply. First, Huckin (1997) recommends approaching the text like an undiscerning reader before employing a critical lens. Second, a text should not be deciphered word by word; rather, it should be put in its proper genre (i.e., corporate communication) since its genre has its own identifiable characteristics. Third, the specific perspective or frame through which the text is presented is a key element of analysis. For this article, we use Netflix's four diversity strategies (Asmar et al., 2023) to reveal (a) how certain concepts are given prominence, (b) the strategic use of particular ideas, and (c) the narratives—or strategic representations of events—used to convey specific meanings.

Concretely, we analyze press releases (N = 800) and diversity reports (N = 2) published between June 2022 and February 2024. Both types of documents outline the most common themes and dimensions (i.e., gender, sexual, and ethnic diversity) the streamer associates with its diversity strategy (Asmar et al., 2023). Unlike the press releases which are published almost daily, the diversity reports are annual publications building and expanding on the insights from Netflix's first diversity study (Sarandos, 2021). We use Instant Data Scraper, an automated data extraction tool, to collect data from the Netflix newsroom. It is important to

note that, while the website uses geo-location to filter the news feed—distinguishing for instance between regional (i.e., Europe) and global news—changes in location do not alter the type of content and/or news articles available. For this research we thus collected both regional and global news, setting Europe as the location and English as the language. Once collected, the data was analyzed using NVIVO and systematized with the development of a codebook combining (a) a deductive approach starting from existing theories in media and television studies, and (b) an inductive approach using the data as basis of the analysis. This dual procedure allowed, following a CDA perspective, a constant interplay between texts (press releases and diversity reports), discourses (the broad systems of meaning), and context (economic, social, etc.) which we detail in the next section.

4. Netflix and the Production of Diversity

To understand how Netflix rhetorically uses its diversity strategy to promote its production culture, we start from the streamer's diversity strategy to outline the dominant discourses noticeable in Netflix's communication about its production culture. Expanding the scope of previous research (Asmar et al., 2023) we label these discourses as follows: (a) Netflix sets local industries to international standards; (b) Netflix invests in and nurtures (new) talents; (c) Netflix sets the local to the global stage; (d) Netflix promotes equity and inclusion in local industries. Rather than focusing on specific regions and/or local production cultures, this article provides a framework that accounts for the cultural dynamics that define Netflix as a transnational service. Hence, while providing country-specific examples for the sake of clarity, our analysis goes beyond local media industries to focus on patterns discernible across national and geographic borders. It is thus important to notice first that each of these discourses is intertwined with and part of Netflix's diversity strategy; hence, they are not disconnected from one another but rhetorically overlap, and in so doing reinforce each other. Second, these discourses intersect: while they may appear to be more pronounced in some regions and/or countries, they are not exclusive to them. Third, these discourses are more than mere corporate vernacular: they are strategic narratives that construct, perpetuate, and embody Netflix's cultural power. Finally, while Netflix focuses on inclusion and representation in its corporate communication, the aim of this study is not to empirically corroborate (or disprove) such strategy; rather, this examination addresses how diversity is used as a rhetorical instrument to promote the streamer's production culture.

The rational tying these four discourses together is summed up in the Netflix Fund for Creative Equity (NFCE). Indeed, alongside the publication of its first diversity report (Sarandos, 2021), Netflix has set up a fund to "help identify, train and provide job placement for the next generation of talents from underrepresented communities around the world" (Netflix, 2023a, p. 4). According to the streamer, this fund, which consists of $100 million over five years, intends to provide practical and actionable follow-up on Netflix's commitment to diversity with the reasoning that more inclusion behind the camera leads to more representation on screen. In its latest update (Bajaria, 2023), the streamer boasts of having invested more than $29 million in two years, partnered with 80 organizations over the globe and developed more than 100 programs in 35 countries to (a) upskill below-the-line talents, (b) create opportunities for marginalized voices, (c) provide development deals for new talents, and (d) invest in local industries. Although this fund represents a marginal investment for Netflix with regard to its global earnings, the actions and programs it finances still figure prominently in Netflix's discourses about its production culture.

4.1. Discourse 1: Netflix Sets Local Industries to International Standards.

While Netflix has invested heavily in the production of local originals around the world, access to and competition over local talents and crews is increasing. In the context of this study, our analysis shows how Netflix discursively presents itself as a key (economic) partner for local industries: setting them to global standards of quality through its investment in local originals while cultivating the untapped potential of local talents. This discourse is framed from the vantage point of a broader strategy of indigenization (Asmar et al., 2023) or Netflix's use of categories of differences (i.e., language, age) to assert its cultural legitimacy at the local level.

Two main narratives shape this discourse: Netflix puts an emphasis on (a) upskilling local talents through training, workshops, and mentorships; and (b) the acquisition of the necessary credentials to work for global productions. As such, Netflix rhetorically presents its production culture as a professionalizing pathway to global television, insisting in its communication—the press releases as well as the diversity reports—on elevating production practices, educating local talents, and empowering (burgeoning) local industries. Interestingly, our analysis shows that this narrative, while noticeable in almost all countries in which Netflix operates, is paramount in countries of the Global South such as Brazil or India. This betrays a strategic attempt to expand the streamer's reach in regions where institutional support is traditionally lacking; nonetheless, these regions have well-established film/television industries and Netflix no longer has the prime mover advantage. In a press release announcing Netflix's new slate of content from Thailand, Netflix director of content in Thailand, Yongyoot Thongkongtoon (2022), states:

> In the past, creators would have to do the international film circuit to drum up interest. But with Netflix streaming the content to more than 190 countries around the world, it's opened up countless opportunities. This in turn motivates creators to pitch us their best ideas and produce their best work. The top quality of our upcoming line-up bears this out. We've pushed the envelope not only in creativity and production value but also [in] ensuring a supporting production environment for each project.

Hence, Netflix positions its production culture as an incubator widening the range of possibilities for local talents and portraying itself as a daring company with the (financial) ability to take risks where other competitors are unable or unwilling to go to such lengths. This emphasis on financial support also denotes a covert effort to attract talents with the promise of state-of-the-art infrastructures and high budgets. Moreover, Netflix's local productions become a testament to the streamer's commitment to local industries as it discursively positions itself as an integral part of the national landscape. Central to this narrative is the emphasis on partnerships with professional organizations and institutional actors such as film funds "to bring in global best practices…and push the boundaries of creation and innovation" (Rizwan, 2023).

On the other hand, this emphasis on upskilling and professionalizing local talents is also used to highlight the streamer's economic and infrastructural contributions to local industries. In this context, Netflix reiterates its key role as a supporter of local screen industries and insists on the fact that the increased production of local originals has led to the growth of local economies. A press release (Netflix, 2024) documenting the economic impact of the *Bridgerton* universe states that "the *Bridgerton* universe has boosted the UK economy by more than a quarter of a billion pounds, supporting almost 5000 businesses over the past five years." Similarly,

addressing the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Greg Peters, Netflix co-CEO highlights that Netflix has invested over $60 billion in content over five years in Spain, on top of the "$1.5 billion we will contribute to European cultural levies and investment obligations over the next three years" (Peters, 2023, p. X). Although this discourse stressing Netflix's legitimacy is ubiquitous in its communication, the rhetoric on its investments at the local level is, we argue, used as leverage to question or circumvent regulation. Indeed, as Fernandes and Albornoz (2023) highlight in the Brazilian context, Netflix promotes a discourse in which its track record at the local level—from investing in local infrastructures to supporting local talents and content—renders regulation unnecessary for a player already committed to the common good. This is expressed by Greg Peters (2023) in Barcelona speaking up against a European proposal to make streaming providers and other online platforms pay for internet service provider's (ISP) network upgrades:

> As more broadcasters shift from linear to streaming, we want a system that encourages more investment in hits like these, whether they're on Netflix, France Television, Globo, Telecinco, the BBC, Disney+ or Viaplay. Some of our ISP partners have proposed taxing entertainment companies to subsidize their network infrastructure….This tax would have an adverse effect, reducing investment in content—hurting the creative community, hurting the attractiveness of higher-priced broadband packages, and ultimately hurting consumers. ISPs claim that these taxes would only apply to Netflix. But this will inevitably change over time as broadcasters shift from linear to streaming.

4.2. Discourse 2: Netflix Invests in and Nurtures (New) Talents

The audiovisual sector—television industries in particular—is notoriously precarious and has traditionally been dominated by gatekeepers such as legacy studios or media conglomerates. These players have amassed enormous power and have been criticized for maintaining the status quo in the industry, limiting financial risks by favouring established creatives to the detriment of young and/or inexperienced talents (Curtin & Sanson, 2016, pp. 1–18; Mayer, 2011). In the context of our study, the analysis shows that Netflix discursively presents itself as democratizing access to the (global) television industry, presenting its production culture as an exception against the backdrop of legacy players often perceived as slow to change. Building on a strategy of differentiation (Asmar et al., 2023)—the strategic use of aspects of difference (i.e., gender, age, etc.) to distinguish itself from its competitors—Netflix in its communication, both in the press releases and the diversity reports, develops a rhetoric focused on upcoming and emerging talents, supporting new stories and genres, fostering the creative vision of talents.

Our analysis underscores two facets of this discourse noticeable in Netflix's communication: (a) levelling the playing field and (b) nurturing talents. First, Netflix narrativizes itself as levelling up the playing field, especially for newcomers in the industry. Indeed, Netflix's rhetoric highlights the streamer's support for upcoming creatives, grandly promoting its collaborations with supranational organizations (i.e., UNESCO), regional associations (i.e., European Producers Club), and/or national institutions (i.e., British Academy of Film and Television Arts—BAFTAs). Through these partnerships, Netflix—via the NFCE—provides grants for talents to develop their stories. It develops professional programs with established production companies and arts/film schools to provide opportunities for the new generation of talents and organizes competitions worldwide to discover new talents. In a press release presenting Netflix's latest collaboration with UNESCO to discover new voices from the African continent, Tendeka Matatu, Netflix Director of Film in Africa declares:

> We are excited to finally bring this anthology of short films created by the next generation of African storytellers to Netflix members around the world. This initiative is a testament to our ongoing efforts to strengthen the pipeline of African storytelling and to include voices from underrepresented communities. We're grateful to our partners at UNESCO who walked this journey with us to provide an opportunity for the six emerging African filmmakers to create and showcase their reimagined folktales to the world, in their own languages, so that more people can see their lives reflected on screen. (Seabi, 2023)

The second facet of this discourse rhetorically presents Netflix as nurturing talents—new and established—and supporting their creative vision. In this narrative, Netflix puts forward the financial power of the service, stressing its commitment to creative freedom and high production values. During an event organized in 2023 to present the streamer's latest ratings to advertising companies, Bela Bajaria, Netflix's chief content officer stated:

> No other entertainment company aspire to create great movies and shows across so many genres, in so many countries, and for such a broad and diverse audience. We do it by partnering with world-class talent—giving them the freedom and support to tell their best stories. Our partnership with them is the single best reason we're able to bring fresh, original storytelling to our members. (Merkouris, 2023)

In line with the strategy of differentiation (Asmar et al., 2023), Netflix attempts to distinguish itself by discursively creating an image of a service led by and built on creative talents. Moreover, by highlighting its broad audience base, the streamer's rhetoric presents an entertainment company which, unlike others, has the capacity to accommodate a wide range of talents and stories.

4.3. Discourse 3: Netflix Sets Local Industries to the Global Stage

While Netflix has been vocal about the need to produce stories for local audiences, global reach is still a major dimension of its transnational strategy (Jenner, 2023). In the context of this study, our analysis shows how Netflix discursively positions itself as the open door to the world for local industries and talents. Indeed, building on a strategy of cosmopolitanism (Asmar et al., 2023), or the strategic use of dimensions of cultural diversity such as language to reinforce its transnational reach, Netflix's rhetoric is framed around ideas of international and/or global appeal, the global celebration of local content and cultures, and the global rise of new industries, from India to Taiwan. This discourse relies on two main narratives: on the one hand Netflix's rhetoric presents its production culture as a steppingstone to the global stage, whereby producing for Netflix becomes synonymous with critical acclaim and global recognition. On the other hand, and coupled with a distinct emphasis on geographic diversity, a narrative aimed at local industries which, due to systemic or historical forces, have found themselves at the periphery of the global entertainment industry.

Central to this discourse are the collaborations the streamer has forged at the local level, especially with local production companies. Indeed, as highlighted by Kim (2022) writing about South Korea, Netflix consolidates its position in a market through these collaborations; meanwhile, such partnerships allow foreign producers not only to finance their content but to establish it within the brand identity of "Netflix Originals" which carries powerful meanings in television markets. Our analysis underscores two main forms of collaborations noticeable in Netflix's communication. First, Netflix's corporate discourse puts forward its

(exclusive) partnerships with local production companies and/or talents that have produced successful content for the streamer. These types of collaboration are discursively presented by the streamer as an opportunity for these companies to scale up production values and simultaneously reach an even broader audience. In a press release announcing a strategic partnership with The Seven, the production company behind the successful Japanese original series *Alice in Borderland* (Sakamoto, 2020–present), Nao Azuma and Jeff McBride, content communication officers state:

> This collaboration further deepens our relationship with TBS [Tokyo Broadcasting System Holdings, Inc.], whose popular drama series are already being streamed on Netflix. THE SEVEN will also have access to an expansive new studio lot of almost 1000 square meters, slated to be one of the largest and most advanced soundstages of its kind in Japan when completed next year, ensuring best-in-class quality for Netflix productions. THE SEVEN aims to tell stories from Japan in new ways, unbound by traditional creative limitations. Our partnership gives them the scale in production and budget, the creative freedom, and the reach to share their groundbreaking showstoppers with the world. (Azuma & McBride, 2022)

Such partnerships, we surmise, are strategically aimed at building franchises based on already successful intellectual properties and/or at creating new stories from already acclaimed creators on Netflix, which in turn guarantees a ready audience. Second, Netflix's discourse emphasizes partnerships with production companies and/or individual talents who have never collaborated with the streamer but have already a well-established presence at the local level. Such collaborations are presented in the streamer's communication as an opportunity for local creatives to amplify their reach at the global scale. In a press release announcing Netflix's partnership with Yash Raj Films (Netflix, 2023b), one of the biggest film production and distribution companies in India, Monica Shergill, vice-president of content in India states:

> We are passionate about serving our broad audiences with series and films that they connect with and love, and we want to do more of this. Yash Raj Films have defined the essence of Indian filmmaking. They are one of the most respected storytellers in the industry. From Kabhi Kabhie to Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, War to Pathaan, their signature stories have been part of our lives and continue to fuel the zeitgeist. Together, we are confident that we can entertain the world with quality films and series like never before. (Netflix, 2023b)

These partnerships seem to be deliberately designed to attract audience segments still out of reach for the streamer. This is especially true in a competitive country such as India where Netflix is not the most popular streamer and mostly caters to high-income and cosmopolitan audiences (Shattuc, 2020).

4.4. Discourse 4: Netflix Promotes Equity and Inclusion in Local Industries

From the #Metoo movement to the #Oscarssowhite boycotts, the global film and television industries have been faced with strong criticisms. Building on a strategy of representation (Asmar et al., 2023)—or the strategic emphasis on categories of difference (i.e., gender, race, etc.) to showcase the streamer's commitment to a more inclusive industry—our analysis shows how Netflix discursively presents its production culture as a catalyst for structural change. Indeed, in this fourth discourse, the streamer positions itself as a haven for all creatives, irrespective of gender, sexuality, or religious creed, with a rhetoric centred

around: amplifying and empowering marginalized voices, providing opportunities for underrepresented communities, leading the industry by example by setting new standards—from inclusive storytelling to building a sustainable service. To this end, Netflix promotes in its communication (i.e., press releases and diversity reports) its various collaborations with and financial support—through the NFCE—to grassroots and non-profit organizations such as Bus Stop Films in Australia to increase the representation of people living with disabilities (Netflix, 2023c). The streamer similarly partners with regional organizations such as the European Producers Club to "help create new opportunities for European women producers" (Rizwan, 2022).

This discourse is built on a narrative that first discursively presents a production culture that empowers marginalized voices by giving them a platform to tell their stories, but also strives to dismantle structural barriers to inclusion. Gender and ethnic diversity are predominant in this narrative, with Netflix putting a strong emphasis in its communication on the active participation of women (on/off screen) as well as the inclusive representation of various ethnic and indigenous communities. In a press release presenting Netflix's Because She Created platform, designed to "shine a spotlight on the creative, talented, inspirational women in the Arab world" (Kharma, 2022), JoAnn Kharma the communications manager in Europe, Middle East, and Africa writes:

> The collection features many other stories that amplify the work of Arab women behind the camera, amplifying underrepresented voices and giving more people a chance to see their lives reflected on screen. We hope these voices provide inspiration for the wider creative community and highlight the importance of equitable representation storytelling, and why it matters. We're proud to be working towards filling the pipeline of women in entertainment in the region. More women behind the camera also have a ripple effect for women in front of it. (Kharma, 2022)

This emphasis on gender diversity and, more broadly, the use of cultural and identity politics as corporate values is emblematic of Netflix's play on a global consciousness (Robertson, 1992) or the strategic use of contemporary discussions—from antiracism to sexual violence—that can resonate globally. Indeed, in an ever-competitive global industry, Netflix's strategic emphasis on representation is, on the one hand, designed to paint its transnational expansion as a humanistic endeavour intent on fostering intercultural connections, rather than one motivated by profits. On the other hand, by highlighting the inclusive character of the service and the company as a whole, Netflix presents itself as an attractive partner, particularly for creators stifled by conservative media policies (Bulut, 2025) or talents whose access to the industry is constrained by systemic injustices such as gender or racial discrimination. Yet, it is interesting to note that, while Netflix has portrayed itself as a game-changer unfettered by (restrictive) national regulations—especially in terms of content and stories—it has given in to censorship, quietly removing titles deemed contentious or obscene from its catalogue (Khalil & Zayani, 2021).

Second, this discourse relies on a narrative presenting a production culture that challenges traditional power structures and redefines how inclusive practices are to be implemented locally. As part of its commitment to more inclusive television industries, Netflix has been vocal about its investing in future talents who can be taught from an early stage about inclusive storytelling and production practices. In a press release presenting the launch of the project Boosting the Next Generation: Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Film Schools in Germany (Peter, 2022), Netflix announces the funding of an independent inclusion and diversity coordinator position for the MaLisa Foundation and six German film schools. This new position, according

to the streamer, is to ensure the inclusion and participation of a broad and diverse group of creatives in the German-speaking world by already equipping film school students with the skills for inclusive storytelling. Sasha Bühler, director film in Europe, Middle East, and Africa adds:

> Instead of launching a new initiative, we want to invest in an existing and proven initiative of German film schools. By supporting and expanding existing infrastructures, we can ensure that the important issues of diversity, equal opportunities and inclusion are holistically integrated into film school education in a timely manner. We are very aware of the long road ahead for all of us. That makes us all the more proud to make this commitment to support diversity and inclusion both in front of and behind the camera in a long-term and sustainable way by investing in the education of the next generation of storytellers. (Peter, 2022)

As such, by actively participating in the education and mentoring of a new generation of creatives, Netflix not only sets the agenda as to how cultural diversity is understood and represented, but the streamer also ensures premium access to a reserve of talents.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Throughout this contribution, we have articulated how Netflix rhetorically uses its diversity strategy to promote its production culture. Hence, this article adds to current explorations of SVODs first by stressing the added value of cultural power as a distinct analytical lens, one that captures the more subtle but no less significant ways in which global streamers shape media ecosystems. Netflix's rhetoric on diversity contributes to cementing the streamer's global legitimacy, underscoring how Netflix's power is not solely about its capacity to influence economic and regulatory landscapes; instead, it is also about the streamer's ability to transform the symbolic and cultural dimensions of media productions. Second, by linking Netflix's production culture to broader discussions of power, this article provides a nuanced understanding of how cultural power operates in the context of global SVODs. This approach moves beyond mere formulations of power as oppressive or coercive, to highlight the complex ways in which Netflix may both empower *and* control local production culture, capturing thus the interplay between economic, political, and cultural dynamics.

However, examining Netflix's rhetoric exposes the tensions and contradictions at play in the streamer's diversity strategy. First, the selective nature of Netflix's investments complicates its rhetoric on inclusion and diversity. Indeed, research shows that its investments are highly selective, favouring large markets (Iordache, 2022) and prioritizing genres that are likely to have a global appeal (Asmar et al., 2024a). This reveals that, although Netflix promotes itself as an advocate for local content, it risks marginalizing voices that do not neatly fit into its global strategy; such an issue becomes more pressing when considering the streamer's ability to define and elevate certain forms of content over others (Noh, 2024). Hence, this is where the dynamics of cultural power come into play—not through overt force, but through the imposition of norms that reflect the needs of global markets rather than the distinct localities with which the streamer engages.

Second, Netflix's discourse around local talents similarly reveals contradictions. While the streamer frames itself as a democratizing force opening pathways for (emerging) creators, providing financial and professional backing as well as visibility, Netflix also often retains intellectual property rights over the commissioned content, limiting the creative autonomy of local producers. This dynamic echoes broader critiques of how

"power to" can be co-opted by market forces with the tension between autonomy and visibility becoming a significant theme. As a result, Netflix's rhetoric about investing in the new generation of talents is complicated by its commercial imperatives: its risk-taking is highly selective, favouring established auteurs or proven intellectual properties over creative experimentation (Cuelenaere & Joye, 2024).

More fundamentally, by emphasizing a discourse of equity and inclusion within media industries, Netflix leverages its cultural power to set new standards as to the definition and representation of various forms of differences. As diversity transforms into a corporate asset, it becomes a mechanism of control over the creative process. This is what Herman Gray (2016) terms precarious diversity or the process whereby the rhetoric on inclusion is used to legitimize corporate interests rather than genuinely unsettling hegemonic structures. Hence, Netflix risks homogenizing the very differences it claims to celebrate as the streamer's control over what stories are told and how they are framed reflects its power to define cultural norms. Ultimately, positioning itself as both a global and local player, Netflix is able to dictate the terms of cultural production in ways that privilege its corporate interests. The streamer's rhetoric thus deflects attention from the underlying power dynamics of global media production, actively sustaining existing hierarchies and embedding new forms of symbolic dominance under the guise of inclusion. As Stuart Hall (1997) reminds us, representation is always tied to power—who has the power to represent whom, and for what purposes. Netflix's power lies thus not only in its ability to produce content but in its ability to shape the global narrative around diversity. In doing so, it risks reducing the complexities of cultural differences to a series of marketable identities, detached from the social, political, and historical contexts that give those identities meaning.

Finally, in addition to examining Netflix's rhetoric, this article concludes that it is essential to also reflect on how Netflix's discourses influence the ways in which creatives imagine the streamer, what Szczepanik (2024) calls streamer imaginaries and defines as the hopes, fears, and anxieties cultural producers ascribe to their work with global SVODs such as Netflix. Put differently, what imaginaries does Netflix's rhetoric on diversity and inclusion evoke or create among local cultural producers? By reflecting on this, further research will explore how Netflix's cultural power is not limited to what the streamer does or to its discourses, but how it is also shaped by the aspirations and possibilities local talents ascribe to Netflix, highlighting thus the various ways in which talents—particularly from marginalized communities—negotiate and respond to Netflix's rhetoric on diversity.

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About the Authors

Axelle Asmar is a PhD researcher at imec-SMIT-Vrije Universiteit Brussel and a teaching assistant at the Department of Communication Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium). Her research focuses on contemporary repertoires of representation and explores how SVODs such as Netflix increasingly put an emphasis on diversity (i.e., sexual, gender, racial, etc.) in their branding, distribution, and production strategies to generate transnational appeal.

Tim Raats (PhD) is professor at the Department of Communication Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and head of the Media Economics and Policy Unit at imec-SMIT-Vrije Universiteit Brussel. He specializes in public service media policy and sustainability of TV production in small media markets. Since 2018, he is also appointed member of the Board of Governors of the Flanders Audiovisual Fund.

Leo Van Audenhove (PhD) is professor at the Department of Communication Studies at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. He is a senior researcher at imec-SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and extra-ordinary professor at the University of Western Cape. He specializes in diverse fields of digital inequality, ICTs and development, and media literacy. In 2021–2022, he held a Francqui chair at the University of Namur.

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ARTICLE

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Beyond the Dutch Quota: Media Policy and Cultural Diversity in Local Video-on-Demand Production (2013–2023)

Berber Hagedoorn [1] and Sandra Becker [2]

[1] Research Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands
[2] Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Berber Hagedoorn (b.hagedoorn@rug.nl)

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Abstract

Starting January 1, 2024, a new Dutch investment obligation requires that streaming services with annual revenues exceeding 10 million euros allocate 5% of their turnover to Dutch content production. This policy aligns with similar obligations in countries like France, Germany, and Italy, which introduced tax-based investment obligations for streaming platforms before the 2018 revision of the EU's Audiovisual Media Service Directive (AVMSD). The AVMSD established a 30% European content quota for subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) platforms and permitted member states to implement revenue-based investment obligations to support local industries. Our article situates the Netherlands as a small-screen media industry and the base of Netflix's first European headquarters. We contextualise the Dutch investment obligation within the evolving European media landscape, examining shifts in diversity and inclusion in Dutch VoD fiction productions from 2013 to 2023. We assess production trends by type and genre by critically analysing policy frameworks and production data from international SVoD platforms (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+) and domestic steaming services (Videoland, NPO Start/Plus). Our findings reveal significant gaps in genre diversity and underinvestment in high-cost historical dramas and fantasy/horror/sci-fi series, highlighting a decade-long reliance on mainstream-oriented genres, including drama and crime series. This context underscores the importance of the new regulation in addressing these disparities and critically examines the requirements of the new regulation. Our article contributes to understanding the state of Dutch VoD production and evaluates the potential of the investment obligation to foster cultural and genre diversity in Dutch VoD fiction.

Keywords

cultural diversity; Dutch television; local content production; small market; subscription video-on-demand; streaming platforms; TV genres

1. Introduction

Since January 1, 2024, a new Dutch law requires commercial streaming services with more than 10 million euros in annual revenue to invest 5% of that amount in local content production. This investment regulation is based on the 2018 update of the EU's Audiovisual Media Service Directive (AVMSD), which set a 30% quota for European audiovisual content for subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) streaming platforms and allows national regulations on revenue-based investment obligations for international SVoDs to support local industries (Directive of 14 November 2018, 2018; Hinke, 2023a, 2023b).

Our article provides a critical analysis of policy and regulation documents and production data (Hagedoorn & Agterberg, 2016; Havens & Lotz, 2016; Havens et al., 2009; Paterson et al., 2016) in terms of numbers, genres, and representation of Dutch societal and cultural diversity in local fiction content produced by international SVoDs for the 10 years leading up to the introduction of the Dutch investment quota. Findings are read against the backdrop of key changes in European audiovisual media policy (Komorowski et al., 2021; Ranaivoson et al., 2023), the European VoD market(s) (Bengesser, 2024), broader SVoD production trends (Koljonen, 2023; Krauss, 2023; Mikos, 2024), and the Dutch media industries recent focus on diversity and equality in gender representation on and off the screen (Crone et al., 2023; Sanders, 2022). We investigate the relationship between diversity (on-screen and genre) and the Dutch investment obligation by analysing longer-running trends in SVoD production in the Netherlands alongside newly established Dutch initiatives such as Vrouwen in Beeld (Women in the Picture, established 2020) and Kleur (Colour, established 2020), who conducted fundamental research on- and off-screen diversity in the Dutch screen industry funded by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (Crone et al., 2023; Sanders, 2022).

Our research, first and foremost, aims to provide insights into the under-researched Dutch VoD market (Esser et al., 2024; Idiz et al., 2021) and thus contributes to the expanding body of literature on national adaptations of the AVMSD. Secondly, our objective is to contribute to the existing research on diversity in television genres and on-screen representation in fiction telefilms (or "single plays") and series (including web series). Television fiction has historically been a significant platform for promoting cultural diversity and pluralism in the Netherlands and beyond (De Leeuw, 2003, among others). Likewise, Idiz et al. (2021, pp. 426, 428–429) underline how the EU founding principle underlies the "respect for cultural diversity" and the EU's ratification of UNESCO's 2005 *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* further emphasises the EU's commitment to promoting cultural diversity and its mediated expressions. In dialogue with this previous research, we examine how Dutch VoD fiction reflects local stories and cultural diversity over the 10 years leading up to the introduction of the investment obligation. Thirdly and finally, we aim to lay the groundwork for future changes to the Dutch investment obligation and suggest ways to revise cultural requirements to ensure representations of diversity in Dutch society and Dutch VoD fiction content. Kostovska et al. (2023, p. 171) argue that AVMSD-based investment obligations are often reassessed soon after implementation (as in France, Italy, and Flanders). Therefore, enhancing transparency on production numbers and local trends previous to its implementation can aid in evaluating the effectiveness of the investment obligation for international SVoDs.

In this context, our primary research question is: What trends in diversity representation and fiction genre production in local Dutch VoD content from 2013 to 2023 highlight the opportunities and challenges of the 2024 investment obligation?

Our study of advancements in local fiction content production in the Netherlands before the Dutch investment obligation's implementation is intended to contextualise the policy in actual production data and patterns. Our article examines the Netherlands as a small market, defined by a limited number of investors and a limited domestic market, which results in reduced funding for original domestic production (Raats & Jensen, 2021, p. 836). Additionally, it is considered a country of origin for multinational SVoD platforms such as Netflix and Disney+ (Idiz et al., 2021, p. 427). Section 2 will contextualise the Dutch investment obligation within the evolving European VoD market and analyse the diverse adaptations of the AVMSD investment obligation across EU member states concerning their local screen industries. In Section 3, we will present the findings of our two-part analysis of Dutch policy papers and production data of fictional VoD content (2013–2023), including qualitative analysis of policy papers and quantitative analysis of production numbers. Section 4 will address the Dutch discourse regarding the adaptation of the AVMSD, with a specific focus on implementing a Dutch investment obligation post-2021 (for earlier discussions, see Idiz et al., 2021). The underlying discourses and objectives related to the Dutch investment obligation are analysed, and the broader aim of the AVMSD is to promote cultural diversity. Section 5 analyses production data concerning local fiction content across various (S)VoD platforms, focusing on genre distributions and diversity representation from 2013 to 2023, with particular attention to genre diversity and the presence of Dutch original productions on international SVoDs before the implementation of the Dutch investment obligation.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. AVMSD Adaptations Across EU Member States

Current research and discussions regarding European audiovisual media policy, especially concerning Netflix and local language productions, highlight the notable advancements in content quotas and investment obligations following the 2018 enactment of the revised AVMSD (Directive of 14 November 2018, 2018). The amendment to the AVMSD allows member states to impose investment obligations on foreign non-linear audiovisual media services aimed at the EU market (Raats et al., 2023) and establishes a mandatory 30% quota for European works within their catalogues. Obligations known as "Netflix taxes" have arisen from regulatory measures in countries such as France (2009) and Germany (2014). These obligations may manifest as direct investments in content, payments to national film institutes, or a combination of both (Komorowski et al., 2021, pp. 12–13; Kostovska et al., 2023). Nine additional European countries, including Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Greece, Croatia, Portugal, Poland, Romania, and the Netherlands, have established quotas for investments in local productions for international SVoDs. The newly instituted Dutch investment obligation, which mandates a 5% investment to promote local audiovisual content production, aligns with the average European requirement for direct or indirect investment ranging from 1–5% (Bengesser, 2024, p. 207). France and Italy are the only countries that significantly deviate from this range, imposing investment obligations of 20 to 25% based on annual revenues (Bengesser, 2024, p. 206).

The revised AVMSD (Directive of 14 November 2018, 2018) hence has two goals given the rise of global SVoD platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+: first, ensuring cultural diversity by including European works on these platforms, and second, adding funding to strengthen the local screen industries. According to Idiz et al. (2021, p. 241), cultural diversity and exchange between European countries are the EU's priorities. The definition of "cultural diversity" is based on UNESCO's 2005 *Convention on the Protection*

and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which defines it as the "variety of cultural expressions…[and] diverse modes of artistic creation, production, dissemination, distribution, and enjoyment, whatever the means and technologies used" (UNESCO, 2005). AVMSD and its precursor, the 1989 Television without Frontiers Directive, aim to protect European markets from US content imports and help promote European production and content flow across borders. The original push for cultural diversity is hence related to the 1970s discourse on US "cultural imperialism" (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1978), according to which "cultural expressions [are being] potentially threatened by globalisation, trade liberalisation, and the expansionist ambitions of the main industrial players in the culture and communications sectors" (Thuillas & Wiart, 2024, p. 292). The Television without Frontiers Directive helped secure European audiovisual production and small-screen industries and enabled European works to travel across borders to balance the heavy influx of US television shows (Broughton Micova, 2023, p. 19). The latest Television without Frontiers Directive's 30% content quota for VoDs is based on the Television without Frontiers Directive's requirement for linear broadcasters to offer European works 50% of their transmission time, including 10% independent production (Broughton Micova, 2023, p. 20). The percentage of independent works is now often secured by investment obligations, which provide financial support either in the form of an indirect levy paid to national film institutions, a direct investment with respective cultural requirements, or a mix of both (Kostovska et al., 2023, p. 161). Like the content quota, the investment obligation is based on "different forms" of investment obligations that "broadcasters, distributors, theatres, and video industries were subject[ed] to" before (Kostovska et al., 2023, p. 161).

The necessity of the financial support stems from the intensified request for high-budget drama production caused by the market dominance of international SVoDs and the decreasing investment of broadcasters, which long served as a "key financing source of European audiovisual content" (Kostovska et al., 2023, p. 157). While differing in market size and international reach, as Ivana Kostovska et al. (2023, p. 158) underline, most national markets in the EU consist of "small audiences, limited budgets, and dependence on public funding." All of these characteristics apply to the Netherlands, which not only qualifies as a "small market" country (Raats & Jensen, 2021, p. 836) with a limited domestic audience, number of investors, and funding bodies but is also characterised by "below average public funding" for public service media (PSM; Bengesser, 2024, p. 207), which in return is needed to sustain high-end drama production. It is, therefore, surprising that the Dutch government adopted the 30% content quota into its Media Act (in Dutch: *Mediawet*) from 2008, only in the year 2020 (Idiz et al., 2021, p. 430; Iordache et al., 2023, p. 189). Since Amsterdam became the home of Netflix's first European headquarters in 2015, the Dutch government has long refrained from imposing an investment quota (Idiz et al., 2021, p. 248). According to Idiz et al. (2021, p. 430), Dutch decision-makers were concerned about the bureaucratic burden on both global SVoDs and the Dutch Media Authority (*Commissariaat voor de Media*), as well as limiting the innovative potential of streaming services in a rapidly changing market. More recent developments of international SVoDs retracting investments in European local drama productions (Koljonen, 2023; Krauss, 2023; Mikos, 2024) seem to have informed the Dutch government's decision to introduce the investment obligation. The required 5% investment by commercial SVoD services is intended to be directly invested in "Dutch cultural audiovisual products" as outlined in the Law *Invoeren investeringsverplichting ten behoeve van Nederlands cultureel audiovisueel product* (introducing an investment obligation for a Dutch cultural audiovisual product; Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2023).

2.2. Cultural Diversity in Perspective: The Dutch Streaming Market and PSM

Diversity has become a buzzword in governmental and media industry discourses since the 2010s (Bengesser & Sørensen, 2024, p. 1367). However, the term can have many different meanings in the context of VoD platforms, their content offers, and PSM. As Bengesser and Sørensen (2024, p. 1368) highlight in their contribution to the special issue of *Convergence* on "Streaming Diversity," the term is often understood synonymously with the "US-American inflexion of identity-based promotional diversity discourses," which cannot directly be transferred to the European context and its VoD markets. Particularly in the context of globally acting streaming giant Netflix, diversity on and off the screen must be understood as a central element of the company's "branding strategy" and vehicle for its transnational expansion (Asmar et al., 2022, p. 25; Jenner, 2024, p. 1474). By promoting diverse content regarding race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and language, Netflix simultaneously generates content with a "grammar of transnationalism" (Jenner, 2024) that speaks to a broad heterogeneous audience and stages itself as a "global curator of progressive and culturally diverse content" (Asmar et al., 2022, pp. 26, 29–30).

International SVoDs have increasingly expanded into European markets, contributing significantly to local content production, including genres like historical drama or science fiction that often require high costs for elements such as special effects and intricate production designs (Afilipoaie et al., 2021; Szostak, 2023). This reflects a strategic localisation approach characterised by a "grammar of transnationalism" aimed at balancing global-local appeal (Jenner, 2018, p. 225; see also Idiz et al., 2024). Netflix, for instance, has emphasised thematic and genre diversity while addressing environmental issues, climate change, and "artistic diversity" by facilitating expanded distribution channels and production resources for European local fiction production (Meir, 2024, p. 108; Szostak, 2023). These efforts are particularly significant in smaller European markets, where local productions have historically faced financial constraints.

Diversity can also be understood in terms of the range of content accessible to audiences, which is shaped by the level of VoD service availability. This reflects what Napoli (1999) describes as "source diversity." The variety of national and international (S)VoD services listed in Table 1 shows that the Netherlands has (a) a large variety of streaming services available and (b) subscription numbers approach or surpass the number of households, indicating a tendency towards multiple subscriptions' (Bengesser, 2024, p. 203).

According to subscription numbers for Q4 2022 listed by Esser et al. (2024), Netflix is the largest SVoD service in the Netherlands with 3.2 million subscribers, followed by the two Dutch PSB SVoD services NPO Start/Plus with 1.8 million and the commercial Videoland with 1.3 million subscribers. The Dutch PSB streaming offer comprises a FVoD service (NPO Start) and a subscription-based version NPO Plus, which offers early access to new content for a subscription rate of 2,95€ per month. The last four services listed individually by Esser et al. (2024) are Disney+ (1.1 million subscribers), Amazon Prime (1 million subscribers), HBO Max (0.9 million subscribers), and Viaplay (0.6 million subscribers). With subscription costs for international streaming services ranging between 4,99€ and 17,99€ (as of Q3 2024), all listed international SVoD services (excluding Sky Showtime and Canal+ due to lack of information on subscription numbers) would fall under the new investment obligation since they make more than 10 million euros based on subscription fees. Considering this latter diversity of SVoD offers and high subscription numbers per household in the Netherlands is important when discussing the potential investment obligations for more diverse Dutch cultural fiction productions.

Table 1. Overview of (S)VoD streaming services available in the Netherlands.

Year	DVD Service	Country	Price
2003	NPO Start (since 2017, before "Uitzending Gemist"; free video on demand)	NL	Free
2013	Netflix	US	8,99€
2014	NPO Plus (SVoD)	NL	2,95€
2015	Videoland	NL	10,99€
2016	Amazon Prime	US	4,99€
2019	Disney+	US	10,99€
2019	Apple TV+	US	9,99€
2022	Viaplay	SE	17,99€
2022	HBO Max	US	4,99€
2023	SkyShowtime	US	5,99€
2023	Canal+	F	14,95€

Notes: Data include the year of entry into the market, country of origin of the service, and subscription prices for basic packages (without advertisement) based on data on respective streaming websites for Q3 2024; the bundled streaming service of Dutch public service broadcaster (PSB) NPO is listed twice since it is both available as an SVoD (NPO Plus) and as a free video on demand (FVoD; NPO Start).

Table 1 only lists Dutch (S)VoD services with a higher number of subscriptions and services that produce their content and thus highlights once more the small size of the Dutch content-producing streaming market. The list of named services by Idiz et al. (2021, p. 428), for example, also includes Pathé Thuis, NLZiet, and Ziggo Go, services that fall into the category "other" in the study by Esser et al. (2024, p. 10). Pathé Thuis is a streaming service by the cinema chain Pathé, which operates, among others, in France, Belgium, and The Netherlands. They offer mainly blockbuster movies for home entertainment. Ziggo Go is the streaming service based on the Dutch cable operator Ziggo; its rival company KPN (Royal KPN N.V.), which developed out of the governmental postal and telecommunication service, produced content for its digital TV channel KPN Presenteert between 2015 and 2018. The paid subscription service NLZiet is a bundled streaming offer of NPO Plus, RTL XL, and Kijk (NPO 2013) and includes BBC First since September 2024 (Kriek, 2024). Due to these channels not being relevant in the context of the investment obligation or content production, they will not be further considered. Nevertheless, their existence shows the diversity of the Dutch streaming market. In contrast, their lack of production shows the reliance on Dutch VoD fiction content on the commercial platform Videoland and the Dutch PSB NPO. At the same time, NPO receives significantly less funding than other European small-market PSBs (Bengesser, 2024, p. 208) and face new cuts of more than 150 euros in the coming years (Beukers, 2024).

Whereas diversity is a branding strategy for internationally acting SVoD services like Netflix, diversity has traditionally been a "key issue" for European public service broadcasting, with its double focus on the universality of reaching a broad audience and representing pluralism of voices and opinions on topics (Bengesser & Sørensen, 2024, p. 1366). This is also the case for the Dutch PSB (or PSM), which since the early 2000s has been summarised and centrally administered by the Dutch Foundation for Broadcasting NPO (*Nederlandse Publieke Omroep*). Before this restructuring of the Dutch PSB sector, the pluralism of the Dutch society was addressed in a unique Dutch pillarisation system with different PSBs serving religious (catholic/protestant), political (liberal/conservative), and ethnically diverse immigration audience groups (Veerbeek et al., 2022, pp. 422–423). In their analysis of PSBs DR (DK), ARD (GER), and BBC (UK), Bengesser

and Sørensen (2024, 1369–1370) found that the difference in the approach to diversity was their definition of "public value" in their mission statement and yearly reports. Since this article includes NPO Start/Plus and content produced for these PSB streaming platforms and diverse representation in productions on- and off-screen representation, it is important to take a closer look at NPO's specific approach to diversity.

Next to "universality" (*verbreding bereik*) and "pluralism" (*pluriformiteit*), NPO has been addressing "diversity" regularly in all their yearly reports since 2006. One would assume that the centralisation of all small PSBs from the pillar system under NPO and the subsequent merging of PSB channels after the Media Law in 2016 from 21 to eight (Veerbeek et al., 2022, p. 423) would lead to a heightened need to address diversity within and beyond NPO's claims about universality and pluralism. In the annual report of 2006, the term appears both in synonymous use with the first two notions but is also mentioned as having a singular aim to "be a reflection of society both in programming and in the workforce" (NPO Jaarverslag, 2006, p. 10). They, therefore, set the goal to have a "diverse workforce (on and off screen) by age, gender, and ethnicity," which reflects the "multicultural society in the Netherlands' and features a balanced distribution of male/female ratio" across different positions and job levels (NPO Jaarverslag, 2006, p. 48). The diversity of NPO employees—particularly off the screen—remains a recurring point on their yearly agenda over the next 17 years. This ambition clearly contrasts the critical findings of the non-profit organisations Kleur and Vrouwen in Beeld, who both confirm a persisting lack of diversity in the Dutch audiovisual sector (Crone et al., 2023; Sanders, 2022). Genre diversity, in contrast to other small market PSM (Bengesser & Sørensen, 2024, p. 1370), is not considered by NPO: In order to reach a large audience also via its streaming service, NPO sporadically highlights in their yearly reports "strengthening on-demand offerings" via "extra [investment] in drama, a genre that lends itself well to this type of viewing" (NPO Jaarverslag, 2016, p. 27), but there is no genre strategy recognisable.

Public value, which first appears in NPO's year report of 2006, has been transferred into a tool for measuring whether NPO fulfils its service to the public in delivering diverse content. The respective tool is called Public Value Monitor Television (in Dutch: Publieke Waarde Monitor Televisie) and was introduced after the merging and restructuring of the Dutch PSB landscape in 2016. Its eight categories (reliability, diversity, variety, political and commercial independence, pluralism, personal relevance to the audience, and social relevance) are thereby transferred into numerical data based on the evaluation of a representative panel of 9,000 people (13 years and older) and an audience panel-based ranking of productions that takes place twice per year (NPO, 2022). This public value is more closely linked to justifying the NPO's existence and state financing and public opinion rather than helping to monitor and address genre and on-screen diversity. Given that the investment obligation features clear definitions of aspects that need to be fulfilled in order for an international SVoD production to be considered culturally representative and relevant, it would be good if the lack of diversity considerations within Dutch local audiovisual production were counterbalanced and categories like genre and diverse on-screen representation taken into account in the phrasing of the Dutch investment obligation.

3. Method and Data Collection

First, for our critical analysis of policy and regulation, which focuses on the Dutch investment obligation and its regulations regarding the definition of a "Dutch cultural audiovisual product," we collected the 58 Dutch senate documents related to the Law *Invoeren investeringsverplichting ten behoeve van Nederlands cultureel audiovisueel product* (introducing an investment obligation for a Dutch cultural audiovisual product; Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2022) and we contextualise the Dutch investment obligation through studies

on media regulation, cultural policy, and VoD investment, comparing it within European regulatory trends. We refer readers to the Supplementary Material file in our article for the additional reference materials we explored during our research process.

Second, in our production data analysis, we concentrated on production numbers of television fiction genres, including series, web series, and telefilms (or "single plays"), and subsequently compiled a dataset encompassing 372 Dutch fiction series and telefilms released from January 2013 to December 2023 for (S)VoD platforms. This dataset includes production numbers from international streamers (Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+, HBO Max, Viaplay), national PSBs (NPO Start/NPO Plus), and RTL Netherlands' commercial streaming service, Videoland. Most production data was provided by the Dutch foundation Vrouwen in Beeld. For the report *Beter is Nog Niet Goed* (Sanders, 2022), detailed production data for 2,469 Dutch films for theatrical release and television productions from 2011 to 2020 had been collected. This data had been sourced from the selected production lists of the Netherlands Film Festival and International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam and overviews of titles by the Dutch PSB NPO for the period 2010–2020. IMDb, producer websites, Wikipedia, the NPO Fund, the Cobo Fund, filmvandaag.nl, tvserieskijken.nl, RTL, Videoland, SBS, Talpa, and Netherlands Film Fund budget data had also been consulted (Sanders, 2022, p. 52). We concentrated on television fiction series (including web series) and telefilms during the data selection process, and we excluded films that were initially released theatrically from our analysis. Like Iordache et al. (2023), we furthermore excluded documentaries, animation, or reality content.

As Sanders observes, much production data concerning length, budget, involved broadcasters, distributors, and genre is not publicly accessible in the Netherlands (Sanders, 2022, p. 52). With Vrouwen in Beeld's help, we were able to obtain data from the Netwerk Scenarioschrijvers (Network Screenwriters) and their *Zilveren Krulstraat* (screenwriting award) production titles for the missing years: 2021–2023. One challenge in compiling the complete dataset for the 10 years from 2013 to 2023 was that the titles in the latter-obtained productions are listed per production year. In contrast, the Vrouwen in Beeld dataset is entirely based on the year each title was released. Another significant limitation to note is the inconsistency in information on "broadcasters and distributors involved and about the genre," which, as Sanders (2022, p. 6) notes, "was unfeasible for th[eir] report to clean up…and include in the analyses." We also collected production data from NPO for telefilms, television series, and web series for the period 2021–2023 to ensure that no PSB productions were overlooked. This further complicates the distinction between program types set out in the original dataset by Vrouwen in Beeld, which only distinguished between single play (telefilm) and series and does not mention web series.

Genre categories, therefore, required recoding, which was based on information from the respective producing channels/VoDs and IMDb. Despite debates on the relevance of genre categories in times of algorithmic recommendation systems, both industry and researchers—particularly in the context of the adaptation of the AVMSD's 30% quota for European content—have turned to it to structure and categorise the vast amount of content available on VoD platforms (Bengesser & Sørensen, 2024; Berliner & Cohn, 2023, p. 479; Iordache et al., 2023). Although genre classifications based on principles of similarity and difference (topic/theme, characters, setting, narrative form, etc.) and their cultural function (see Feuer, 1992) can be understood across cultural contexts, there are cultural and industry-specific variations. In the Dutch television context, this is especially the case with the genre "drama," which a variety of formats can be categorised under, including telefilms or "single plays" of less than 120 min., several-part telefilms or "single

plays" released as part of a more extensive, recurring thematic series, as well as miniseries with one season with a maximum of six episodes, and series with at least six episodes per season. This differentiation of formats within the genre bares similarities to the German format variety in the genre (see Becker & Hagedoorn, 2022, p. 113–114), but also features unique cases such as the yearly released NPO telefilm series *One Night Stand* (2006–2018), consisting of up to eight "single plays" by upcoming directors and screenwriters. In order to give an indication of the diversity of formats and the hours of content in the genre "drama" and its sub-genres, we use the categories "single play" (originating from the dataset by Vrouwen in Beeld) as well as miniseries and series alongside the genre in our analysis of local Dutch fiction production from 2013 to 2023.

4. Policy Analysis: The Dutch Investment Obligation for Audiovisual Cultural Productions

As laid out in Sections 1 and 2, the Dutch investment obligation introduced on 1 January 2024, is a policy designed to add funding to local screen productions by requiring VoD platforms that generate over 10€ million annually in the Dutch market to reinvest 5% of their revenue (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2022). This amendment to the 2008 Media Law applies to all the major international streaming services like Netflix, Disney+, Amazon Prime, and HBO Max. Crucially, 60% of these investments must go towards independent productions, while the remaining 40% can be used for in-house projects, allowing platforms some flexibility. The investment obligation originated from the 2018 recommendations of the Council for Culture (in Dutch: Raad van Cultuur) to address concerns in the media landscape, particularly the dominance of international platforms and the lack of investment in local productions. The Dutch Senate (in Dutch: Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal) views this measure as a necessary response to the changing media landscape and the increasing influence of international streaming services. Research on small markets and their strategies for engaging with SVoD services further highlights the need for this policy intervention (Domazetovikj et al., 2024).

Between 2021 and mid-2023, Dutch policymakers discussed the introduction of an investment obligation for VoD providers to strengthen the domestic audiovisual industry. These discussions were driven by concerns over the dominance of international streaming platforms and the insufficient investment in Dutch cultural content (Idiz et al., 2021). While adapting the AVMSD, policymakers debated how effective such an obligation would be. The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science initially advocated for less prescriptive regulations to prevent excessive administrative burdens before the AVMSD's 30% content quota for European works was implemented in September 2021 (Idiz et al., 2021, p. 430). Despite commissioning research from the Council for Culture (Raad voor Cultuur, 2018) and Dialogic (Maltha et al., 2019), the Dutch Ministry did not use production data to assess ways of increasing investment in Dutch cultural content. Dialogic's study raised concerns over the lack of empirical data and the difficulty obtaining information from industry stakeholders due to privacy, competition, and the high workload involved. Their research in the end solely included desk studies, interviews, literature reviews, and economic-theoretical analysis and no actual numbers on productions and related costs (Maltha et al., 2019, p. 13).

A key part of the investment obligation is how it defines a "Dutch cultural audiovisual product." The regulation aligns with the Netherlands' broader cultural policy objectives, as seen in PSB requirements to offer diverse perspectives on societal issues (Veerbeek et al., 2022, p. 423). According to Iordache et al. (2023), the Netherlands also imposes a 50% investment obligation on linear television, with a separate

production quota in Dutch and Frisian. The newly introduced VoD obligation extends this regulatory framework to streaming platforms, reinforcing measures to support cultural production. A Dutch cultural audiovisual product is defined in the 2024 investment obligation as a European production that meets at least one of the following criteria (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2023, pp. 2-3):

1. The original screenplay is mainly (at least 75%) in Dutch or Frisian.
2. The main characters primarily speak Dutch or Frisian.
3. The script is based on a Dutch or Frisian literary work.
4. The central theme relates to Dutch culture, history, society, or politics.

By applying these criteria, the policy ensures that audiovisual productions reflect and contribute to Dutch cultural heritage. It also specifies key content categories, including documentary films, drama series, and feature films. A drama series, for instance, must be a fiction-based audiovisual production with a continuous storyline and a total running time of no less than 120 minutes, divided into episodes of at least 20 minutes each (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2023, p. 2). However, changes to the legislation with its acceptance in June 2023, introduced that for "half of the investment obligation, the aforementioned genres should be deleted and all genres with the exception of sports, be covered by this law." This amendment was justified in the name of allowing for responses "to innovations" (Inhoudelijke Ondersteuning, 2023, p. 2)

The new law that requests international VoDs to invest 5% of their annual turnover in local Dutch content production, is overall promising but does not come without potential flaws. The revenue from commercial on-demand media services is not limited to subscription, but likewise includes revenue generated through advertising, user in-app transactions, sponsorships, and product placement (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2023). According to Telecompaper, streaming services made 1,2 billion Euros in revenues in 2024, 5% of this total amount would lead to about 60 million reinvestment into the Dutch screen industry ("Streamingdiensten passeren grens," 2025). Dutch screen industry representatives like Doreen Boonekamp, former CEO of the Netherlands Film Fund, therefore also showed themselves content with the Dutch measures as a "first step to boost local production" and create a circular ecosystem where those at the end of the value chain reinvest in its beginning (Dams, 2023). She, however, wishes to see an expansion of the financial obligations on streamers in the form of a mix of a levy and direct investment to ensure the "levelling [of] the playing field with the countries surrounding us, especially for independent film production" (Dams, 2023). The 2024 version of the Dutch investment obligation thus far solely includes direct investments and leaves a lot of room to streamers to decide on the type of production they want to invest in since all programming except for sports could count as "Dutch cultural audiovisual product" (if the above listed requirements are fulfilled) with only half of the investment being required to go to key content categories like documentary films, drama series, and feature films. Furthermore, 40% of the investments are allowed to be used for in-house productions, which in case of the leading SVoD service Netflix could also mean a production in its European production hub in Spain or completely outside of Europe as long as the spoken language is Dutch or Frisian or the production is based on a Dutch or Frisian literary work.

While the Dutch investment obligation aligns with similar regulations in larger European markets, the Netherlands have taken a more flexible approach, allowing VoD providers to decide how they invest within the boundaries set by the law. Equivalent investment obligation laws in Spain and France, in contrast, impose stricter direct investment requirements (Hinke, 2023a, 2023b). The height of the required reinvestment in

local productions similarly differs: France requires an investment obligation of between 5.15% and 15% of annual turnover, while Italy has a similar scheme focused on domestic content (Bengesser, 2024). The Dutch approach is also less rigid than policies in Belgium, where investment obligations are more narrowly defined and closely monitored (Kostovska et al., 2023). The Dutch Media Authority (*Commissariaat van de Media*) will oversee compliance and evaluate the regulation's impact on production diversity, industry stability, and cultural representation, but their assessment takes place retrospectively based on production numbers that commercial VoD services are asked to hand in for the first time in 2027.

The Dutch investment obligation is a meaningful measure to protect and promote Dutch audiovisual cultural productions in an increasingly globalised media environment (Dams, 2023). By requiring domestic and international VoD providers to contribute financially, the law seeks to build a sustainable and diverse media sector. While challenges persist—particularly in compliance, enforcement, and the evolving streaming landscape—the policy marks an important first step in balancing national cultural interests with international market forces. Future assessments will reveal its effectiveness in meeting cultural and economic objectives. To better facilitate this assessment, we will in the following present the outcome of our analysis of production data for Dutch fiction productions from the 10 years leading up to the introduction of the investment obligation in the Netherlands.

5. Production Data Analysis: Trends in Production Numbers, Genres, and Diversity in Dutch VoD Fiction (2013–2023)

In the context of the Dutch market, we examine the interplay between diversity and the Dutch investment obligation by analysing trends in SVoD productions from 2013 to 2023, focusing on how these trends highlight gaps in cultural diversity and genre representation before implementing the investment obligation. By contextualising these trends alongside newly established Dutch initiatives such as Vrouwen in Beeld and Kleur, as well as research funded by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science regarding diversity both on and off the screen in the Netherlands (Crone et al., 2023; Sanders, 2022), we demonstrate how the observed underrepresentation of diverse narratives and high-cost genres informed the development of the investment obligation. This discussion explicitly frames the analysed titles as trends that predate the introduction of the investment obligations to provide a more apparent baseline for understanding and reflecting on the regulation's objectives. In the following, we present the trends we found in fiction series (including web series) and telefilms (or "single plays") from the local public broadcaster (NPO), the local commercial broadcaster (RTL/Videoland), and international streaming services (Netflix, Disney+, Amazon Prime, HBO Max, Viaplay) from Netflix's Dutch market entry 2013 to 2023: Figure 1 depicts the production numbers of local Dutch SVoD fiction content (2013–2023); Figure 2 shows the genre diversity of local Dutch SVoD fiction content (2013–2023); Figure 3 shows the genre diversity of 259 local Dutch VoD fiction series excluding single play and web series; and Figure 4, illustrates the genre diversity in Dutch local language content exclusively produced by national and international commercial VoDs.

Our empirical production data analysis focuses on two key aspects of diversity: genre diversity and on-screen representation of diversity in Dutch VoD fiction productions from 2013 to 2023. Genre diversity examines the variety of production types, particularly underrepresented high-cost genres such as historical drama and science fiction. On-screen representation of diversity addresses the diversity of characters regarding gender, cultural, and ethnic background in Dutch-language fiction content (see Crone et al., 2023).

The review of production data helps to give an overview of Dutch fiction productions in the age of streaming, but has limitations: First, given that production data is already not publicly accessible in the Netherlands (Sanders, 2022, p. 52), the analysis does not cover economic information on diversity in production budgets which companies have been reluctant to share in the past with researchers (Maltha et al., 2019). Second, while we highlight some regional and linguistic aspects, we do not provide a comprehensive analysis of diversity across all demographic categories, as this falls beyond the scope of our dataset. On-screen diversity will hence only be addressed when discussing exemplary production titles. Third, audience reception and discoverability—important dimensions when considering content diversity in the age of streaming—are not included, as they require separate methodological approaches. These omissions are necessary to focus our analysis on trends in production diversity (genre and on-screen) relevant to contextualise and critically evaluate the investment obligation's proclaimed goal to produce Dutch cultural content for a broad Dutch audience.

Whereas the dip in production in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic is the most striking at first glance, Figure 1's overview of 10 years of Dutch fiction production for VoD services shows a slight increase in Dutch local language original productions by international SVoDs after 2018. Fall 2018 marks the revision of the AVMSD and the introduction of the 30% content quota for European works as well as the end of the fifth year of Netflix operating in the Netherlands. The increase becomes particularly visible in 2021 and 2022, with both years featuring two Netflix productions and one Amazon Prime production. As Idiz et al. (2021, p. 431) mention in the context of the 30% quota for European works, "first reporting for 2021/2022 [was only] due in 2023." This trend could hence be read as aligning with research indicating that platforms increasingly shift to original productions to comply with quotas and enhance market presence (Kostovska et al., 2023). It likewise indicates the little effort invested in local language original content production in a small market like the Dutch. While this reading of the increase of Netflix's investment in Dutch local language original production might have been motivated by the AVMSD, this is more questionable in the case of Amazon Prime since the productions in 2021 and 2022 directly followed its Dutch market rollout in 2020. It is therefore also possible that both Netflix and Amazon Prime solely invested in local content to broaden their streaming libraries and attract new subscribers.

Before 2018, Figure 1 only featured one drama miniseries, namely the four-part *Tokyo Trial* (2016), which was counted as a Dutch production. It is important to underline, however, that this is a co-production by the Japanese PSB NHK, the Amsterdam-based production company FAAT Productions, and Netflix. *Tokyo Trial*, in many regards, stands out from other local Dutch original content by international SVoDs: It is not a Dutch local language original production shot in Dutch, but in English. It is a co-production directed by an American-Dutch director duo: Rob W. King and Pieter Verhoeff. It is a four-part miniseries that centres its storyline around the Dutch judge Bert Röling (played by Dutch actor Marcel Hensema). The miniseries premiered at the 37th edition of the Dutch Film Festival in 2017 and is referred to by the Dutch press as Verhoeff's "film" (van der Laan, 2017), a testament to the Dutch understanding of formats including several parts comprising telefilms (or "single plays"). Based on how Verhoeff frames the production in an interview with the Dutch film magazine *Filmkrant*, the miniseries was, moreover, in its first instance, a production promoted by the Japanese PSB NHK: "I was asked by producer Hans de Weers, who in turn was approached by Japanese public broadcaster NHK to co-produce *Tokyo Trial*" (Graveland, 2017). Nevertheless, given that the miniseries touches on real-life Dutch historic characters, an argument could be made that *Tokyo Trial* is a "Dutch cultural audiovisual product," since it fulfils requirement four in that "the central theme relates to Dutch culture, history, society, or politics" (Eerste

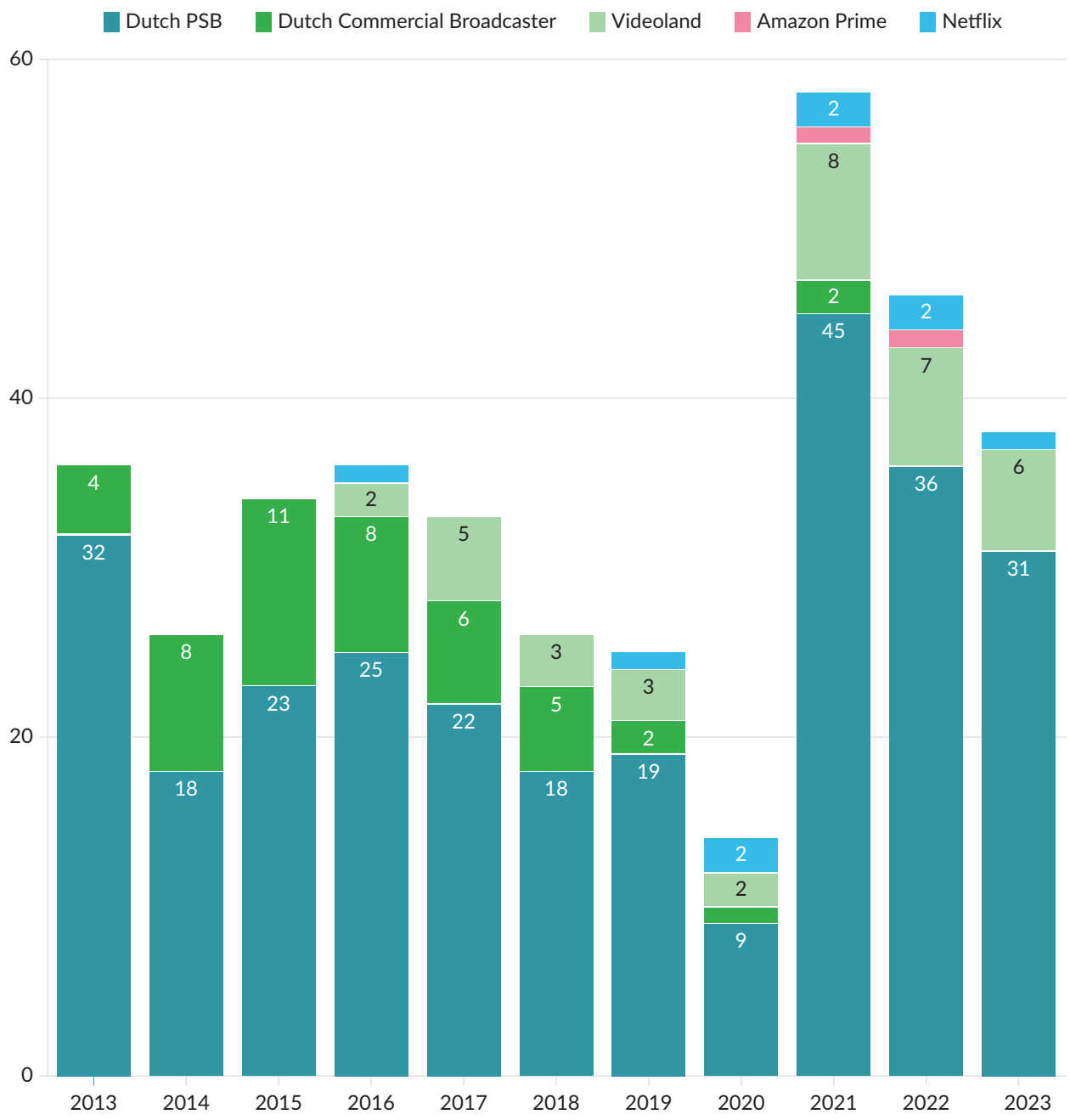

Figure 1. Production numbers of local Dutch SVoD fiction content (2013–2023). Note: If no number is mentioned in the figure, then there was only one production (see Amazon Prime in 2021 and 2022 and Netflix in 2016, 2019, and 2023).

Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2023, p. 3; see Section 3.29f). Being an odd one out in the trends for local SVoD content production by international streamers up to the introduction of the Dutch investment obligation in 2024, it showcases how much room the requirements would leave for global streamers to showcase their compliance with the new law.

Between 2018 and 2023, Netflix produced between one and two Dutch local language originals. However, most of these Netflix productions are related to the crime series *Undercover* and its various seasons and

spin-off series, which are likewise co-productions by Netflix, the Flemish PSB streaming service VRT Max, and the Dutch commercial broadcaster SBS6. What needs to be clarified in the context of both of these co-productions is that titles like *Tokyo Trial* and *Undercover*, as well as its spin-off series *Ferry*, are counted as Dutch productions despite having been co-produced and, in the latter case, are also originally filmed in Dutch. The Dutch-Flemish crime drama franchise *Undercover* would also fulfil the requirements of the Dutch investment obligation since it is not just 75% but entirely in Dutch (see Section 4). As Eduard Cuelenaere and Alexander De Man (2025) show, there is a history of Flemish-Dutch co-productions long before streaming, mainly motivated by ideological reasons (e.g., the strengthening of Flemish culture in Dutch in Belgium) or for commercial reasons, such as higher production budgets and speaking to a larger audience. A combined commercial and policy reason could also motivate international VoDs to invest in Flemish-Dutch coproductions to fulfil direct investment obligations in Flanders (Belgium) and the Netherlands. If these co-productions were not counted as Dutch productions, Netflix's number of Dutch productions since the streamer's rollout in the Dutch market in the fall of 2013 would be down to solely three series: *Ares* (2020), *Misfit: De Serie* (2021), and *Dirty Lines* (2022).

Next to Netflix, our dataset only featured two fiction productions by Amazon Prime (see 2021 and 2022). Whereas NPO and the Dutch commercial SVoD platform Videoland doubled or tripled their production numbers following the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, which saw a worldwide, dramatic increase in VoD consumption (Johnson & Dempsey, 2024), international streamers' investments in Dutch cultural audiovisual fiction content remained limited. What becomes apparent in the overview of empirical production data for the Dutch VoD market in Figure 1 in comparison to subscriber numbers to international services in Table 1 (Section 2.2) is that an additional regulation, such as the new Dutch investment obligation, is relevant to channel revenues from international SVoDs into the local screen industries to secure local fiction production long term.

As Figure 2 shows, the three most popular genres in the full dataset of local SVoD content (2013–2023) are drama (133 productions), crime (67 productions), and comedy (54 productions), with fewer productions in more expensive genres like fantasy/horror/sci-fi, thriller, and historical drama. Due to the high production costs of genres such as historical dramas and fantasy/horror/sci-fi, which frequently explore diverse narratives, Dutch SVoD primarily consists of affordable genres such as drama, crime, and comedy (including telefilms (or "single plays") and web series), which typically cater to a broad audience by featuring universal themes and narratives that appeal to a mainstream audience and frequently feature a predominantly white cast (Afilipoaie et al., 2021; Crone et al., 2023). Drama can hence also feature highly among NPO productions in the dataset, but it is limited to family-oriented (inter-)generational narratives with a mainly white cast (see Crone et al., 2023, who likewise worked with the dataset by Vrouwen in Beeld). Recent NPO drama series that were able to attract a large audience according to report viewer numbers in the Dutch press, like *Oogappels* (BNNVARA, 2019–2024) and *Dertigers* (BNNVARA, 2020–present), have though also started to incorporate a more diverse Dutch cast with family roots in Suriname, Marocco, and the Dutch Antilles, featuring actors and actresses Mike Lianon, Ciraj Amalal (both in *Oogappels*), Joy Wielkins and Sabri Saddik (both in *Dertigers*; "Dertigers keert in 2025," 2024; "Oogappels is online knaller," 2024).

Whereas Figure 2 features an overview of genre diversity across 372 productions over the 10 years after Netflix entered the Dutch market, Figure 3 only shows genre diversity across full-length series. Excluding shorter fiction productions categorised as single plays (telefilm), miniseries, or (web)series, the number of

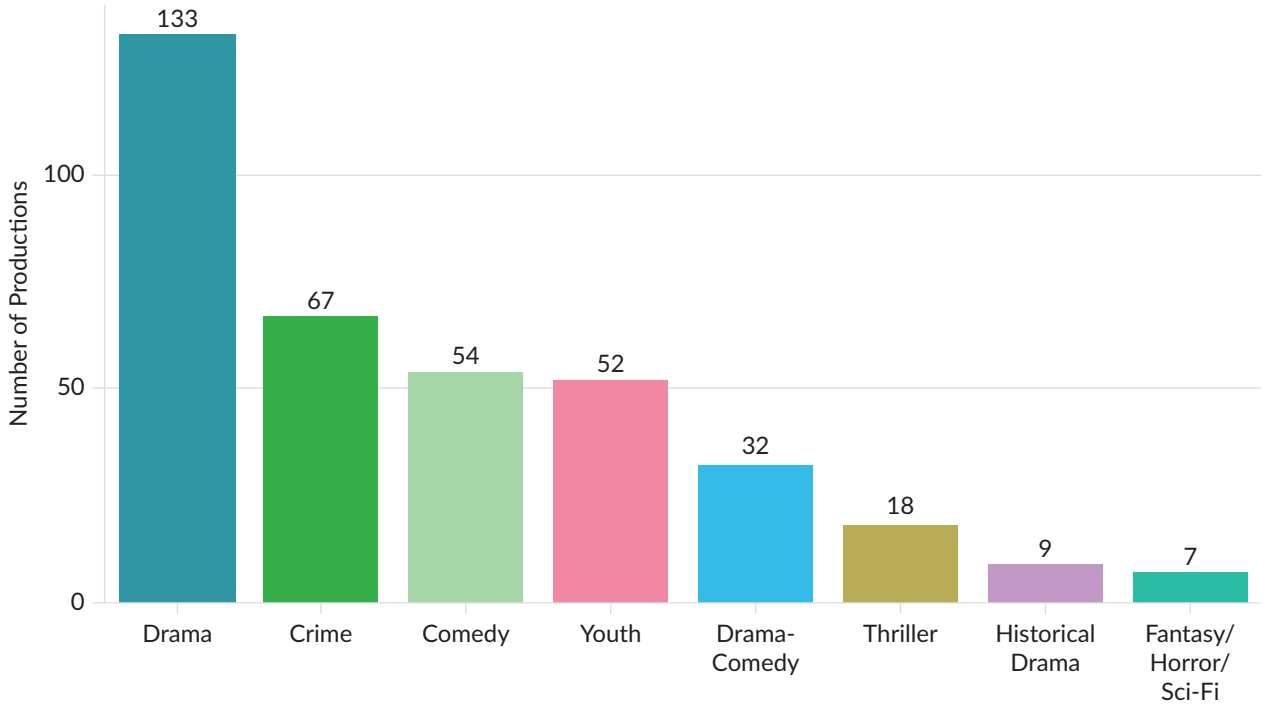

Figure 2. Genre diversity of local Dutch VoD fiction content (2013–2023), including all productions (series, web series, miniseries, and single plays).

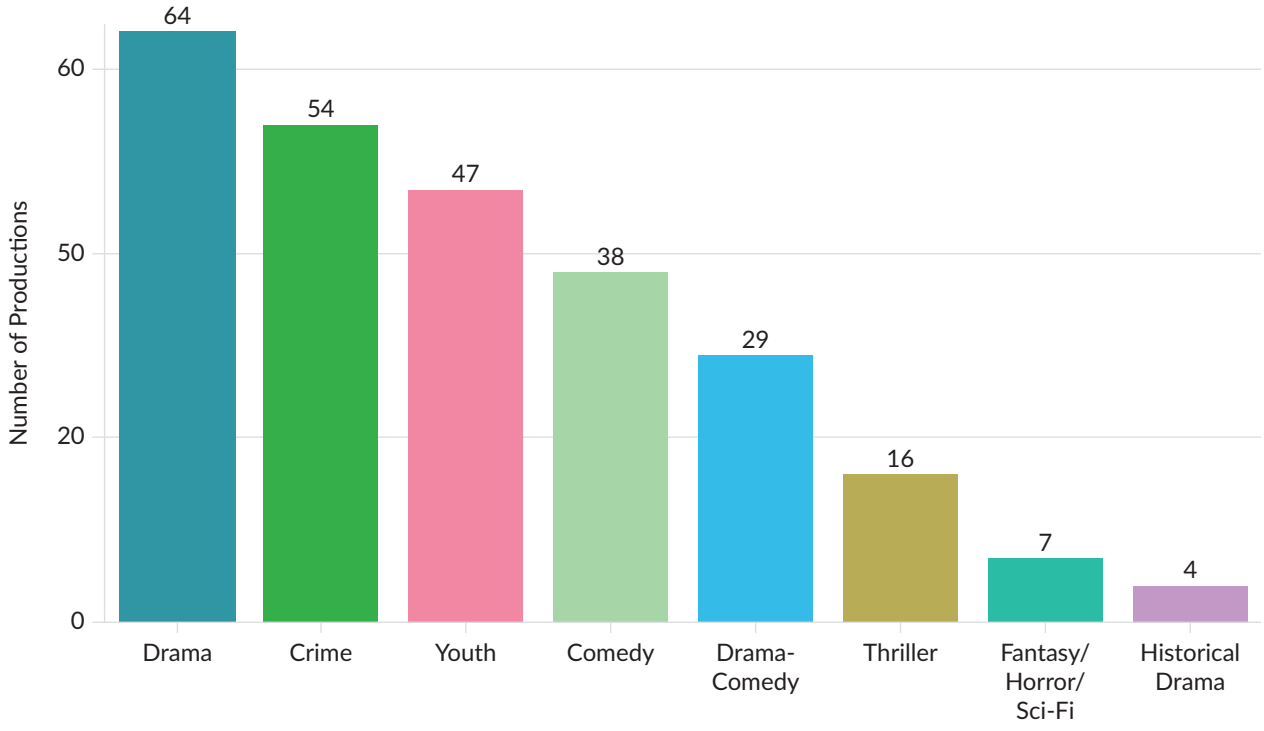

Figure 3. Genre diversity of 259 local Dutch VoD fiction series (excluding single play and web series, 2013–2023).

fiction productions over the analysed ten-year period drops from 372 to 259 productions. The genre distribution is particularly affected in the case of historical drama series, which now come in last place with four titles only behind the genre fantasy/horror/sci-fi.

Figure 4 shows a close-up of the genre diversity across fictional Dutch local language original series produced by commercial SVoDs. The added genre diversity argued for in previous studies on other European screen media markets and local language original production (Meir, 2024, p. 108; Szostak, 2023) cannot be found in production data from national and international commercial SVoDs in the Netherlands. The Dutch PSB NPO infrequently addresses costly genres such as fantasy/horror/sci-fi, thriller, and historical drama. As illustrated in Figure 4, these genres are similarly scarce in Dutch local language productions by national commercial entities and international SVoD platforms. The least number of productions and genre diversity can be found in the productions by Amazon Prime, limited to two productions only: the drama series *Modern Love* (2021) and the (satire) comedy series *TRECX* (2022). Although Netflix's local Dutch language originals include more productions and exhibit increased genre diversity, crime remains the predominant genre. This circumstance is related to the popular first Dutch-language original series *Undercover*, which has three seasons and four productions in this genre (episodes 7 and 8 of season 3 have been listed as separate productions in the dataset based on them being released separately in consecutive years). As discussed earlier, although a Dutch local language production, *Undercover* is a Flemish-Dutch Netflix local language original co-production. The spin-off *Ferry: The Series* (2023–present) accounts for the sixth Netflix production in this genre.

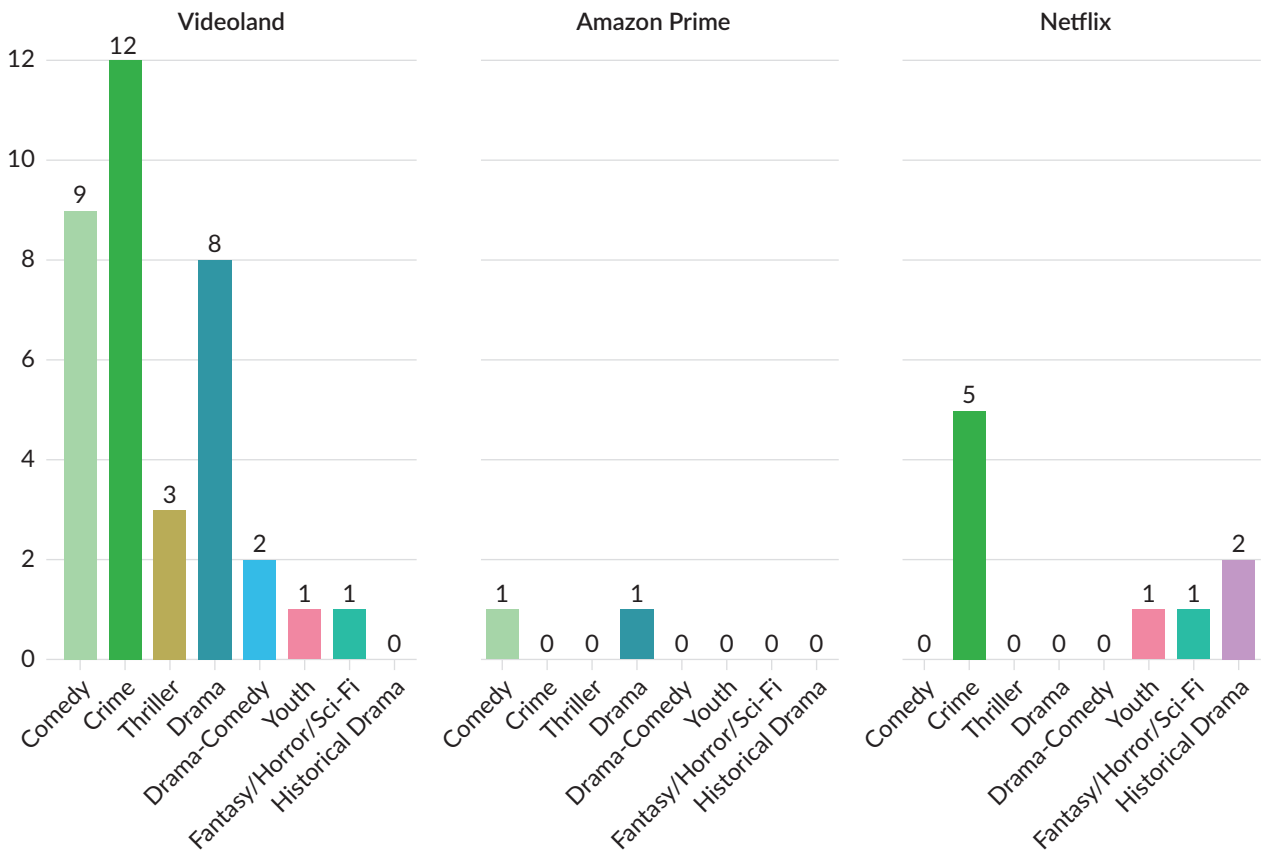

Figure 4. Genre diversity in Dutch local language content produced by commercial SVoDs (2013–2023).

Rather than enhancing genre diversity among Dutch VoD productions, Netflix contributes to cast and on-screen diversity through a limited number of productions in genres other than crime. This circumstance correlates with the streamer's visible diversity branding strategy (Asmar et al., 2022; Jenner, 2024): The historical drama *Dirty Lines* (2022), for example, features the Dutch actress Joy Delima as its leading female protagonist, who has Curaçaoan/Surinamese roots. Similarly, the Dutch fantasy/horror/sci-fi series *Ares* (2020) on Netflix features the Dutch actress Jade Olieberg among its main cast, whose family has roots in Suriname, Trinidad, and China (Wiegman, 2022).

In contrast to this highlighting of the diverse cultural influences in Dutch society and the country's colonial past, the setting of both of these Netflix Dutch local language productions, as well as Amazon Prime's *Modern Love*, is Amsterdam, which is easily recognisable to a global, non-Dutch audience. The geographic localisation strategies in these Dutch local language originals support Idiz et al.'s (2024) argument about localisation mainly functioning as "window dressing" that pays little attention to the larger Kingdom of the Netherlands. It is striking that Dutch-language content that does address the Netherlands' colonial past in Indonesia, such as the (initially theatrically released) film *De Oost* (in English: The East, 2020), are more often Dutch productions that Netflix bought for its catalogue.

Suppose the investment obligation introduced in 2024 aims to do more than facilitate local content to preserve the Dutch screen industry, it is necessary to consider in how far Dutch national language, culture, and society in all its diversity is promoted in local content production by international VoDs. The discussed examples of earlier Dutch local language productions by international VoD platforms show that "Dutch cultural audiovisual products," even when they feature main characters who speak Dutch or Frisian and are set in the Netherlands, can be limited in their promotion of Dutch cultural diversity and identities beyond Amsterdam. In short, because (a) the law is broadly phrased to afford streamers flexibility in their production, and (b) the specific Dutch cultural elements are not checked before productions are issued but rely on retrospectively self-reported data by the respective international VoDs, the use of strategies like "window dressing" can easily be overlooked.

Even though the first round of self-reporting by international VoDs on their compliance with the 5% investment quota in Dutch productions is only due in 2027, a look at empirical production data from the 10 years leading up to the introduction of this new AVMSD-based law highlights that a revision of the phrasing of the law would be preferable to direct foreign VoDs' investments more precisely towards fictional productions of rare, costly genres and productions who pay attention to more varied representation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands' diverse society, history, and geography beyond Amsterdam.

6. Conclusion

Due to the limited regulatory pressure to support diverse, local productions, Dutch SVoD content before 2024 tends to reflect traditional genres. It has limited diversity regarding on-screen representation (see also Crone et al., 2023). An important change that could increase diversity in Dutch fiction is the new investment obligation, which mandates a 5% turnover investment from commercial and foreign platforms into Dutch content. Future research should examine the regulation's numerical impact on Dutch fiction production across genres as well as the diversity in its representation of Dutch culture and society. This is particularly uncertain because the 2024 investment obligation is neither prescriptive nor precisely defined. According to

the law, a "Dutch cultural audiovisual product" is a production with Dutch or Frisian main characters, that is based on a Dutch or Frisian language script or novel, and/or based on a Dutch culturally, historically, or politically related theme. The law allows streamers to produce freely and is checked afterwards based on self-reporting. Given the earlier observed trends in local productions by international streamers in the Netherlands since 2013, it is likely that these commercial VoD services opt for shorter miniseries or telefilms over full-length series, Flemish-Dutch co-productions, cheaper non-fiction content like reality TV programming around Dutch celebrities, and a simple "window dressing" strategy (Idiz et al., 2024) in local fiction productions regarding location, character, and language that are easily recognizable to a wider European and/or global audience. Netflix's announcement of its new Dutch local production slate including the reality show about the Spanish-Dutch actress Yolanthe Cabau and her new life in Los Angeles, or the film *iHostage*, based on the hostage-taking at the Apple store in Amsterdam in 2022, seem to indicate this tendency ("Netflix komt met realityprogramma," 2024). Our article hence aims to offer a background against which to reassess the Dutch investment obligation and to examine developments in the VoD market following its implementation in January 2024.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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About the Authors

Berber Hagedoorn (PhD) is assistant professor of media studies and audiovisual culture at the University of Groningen. Berber is a media and culture scholar passionate about the power of images and sound. She researches the technique and ethics of storytelling and is on the EUscreen Foundation board (www.euscreen.eu). Her co-edited book *New Challenges in European Television* examines transnational television production. Photograph by Reyer Boxum.

Sandra Becker (PhD) is assistant professor in media industries and cultural diversity at the Department for Media and Culture Studies at Utrecht University. Her research focuses on the dynamics of on- and off-screen representation of gender and diversity, transnational television drama series production and reception, as well as developments in the European VoD markets.

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Televisual Inequalities and Gender Dynamics in German News: Health Experts During the Covid-19 Crisis

Juliane Wegner

Institute for Media Research, University of Rostock, Germany

Correspondence: Juliane Wegner (juliane.wegner@uni-rostock.de)

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Abstract

This study explores gender representation among healthcare experts on German television during the first wave of Covid-19 reporting, addressing the broader issue of gender disparities in media coverage. Using Caldwell's concept of televisuality and the audio-visual character analysis (ACIS) method for content analysis, we examined 174 corona-related news programmes that aired between 16 April and 30 April 2020. Of the 2,240 characters analyzed, 1,299 were experts, yet only 15% were women. Despite women's strong presence in healthcare professions, men overwhelmingly dominated medical and political discussions during this period, while women were more frequently shown in supportive or emotional roles. These findings reveal a significant gender gap in the visibility and portrayal of experts during the pandemic's early crisis communication, with men disproportionately occupying authoritative roles. This imbalance underscores how media coverage in public health emergencies continues to reinforce traditional gender norms, limiting female representation in leadership positions. The study highlights the need for more equitable media representation in crisis reporting to better reflect societal diversity and ensure inclusive communication.

Keywords

Covid-19; gender representation; healthcare experts; televisuality; women in media

1. Introduction

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a profound global crisis, presenting significant health, economic, and social challenges across the world, including Germany. In hindsight, this crisis led to what Allmendinger calls an "appalling retraditionalisation" (Allmendinger, 2020, p. 1) of gender roles that has severely impacted women. This includes for example a higher burden of care work, a widened gender pay gap, and an increase

in domestic violence (Haupt et al., 2020; Institut für Höhere Studien – IHS, 2021; Kohlrausch & Zucco, 2020; Möhring et al., 2020). As a result, the female public sphere seemed to be crumbling, with women relegated to private, secluded spaces.

Despite the public healthcare sector, a primarily female-dominated area (German Medical Association, 2016; Radtke, 2021), receiving heightened media attention during the crisis, women were less visible in the televisual coverage, even given their central role and overrepresentation in systemically relevant professions (Koebe et al., 2020; Öz, 2020). Could this imbalance be a result of structural inequalities in institutional communication strategies, which may limit opportunities for female experts to engage in media appearances? Or does it reflect broader patterns of retraditionalisation that are also evident in other television programming? Various studies on gender representation in informational television (e.g., news TV) in Germany indicate that there are already fundamental subject-independent inequalities in character staging (Prommer & Linke, 2019; Prommer et al., 2021). We wanted to understand if these disparities were reproduced in the portrayal of healthcare professionals in the pandemic media coverage. We asked, to what extent did the gendered representation of medical experts in media coverage reflect broader societal inequalities? Did male-dominated media narratives reinforce systemic biases by undercutting the recognition of women's critical roles in public health? This study aims to clarify the extent to which the first wave of the pandemic, characterised by high information pressure and an extremely dynamic situation in terms of crisis communication, intensified gender-specific inequalities. Our focus is on informational television, which played a pivotal role as a reliable information source for over two-thirds of the population during the pandemic's initial phase (Appinio, 2020).

To undertake our analysis we adopt the work of Caldwell (1995), specifically his concept of "televisuality." Caldwell describes this enduring influence of television on media users as the way in which television's visual and stylistic intensification not only shapes its imagery but also reflects the social and cultural contexts of media production (Caldwell, 2013). In times of crisis, television's heightened presence and significance make any unequal representation of women, particularly as healthcare experts, even more problematic.

In order to support our analysis with empirically reliable figures, the following question is investigated: How are experts from the healthcare sector represented in German news television and in the context of crisis-communicative televisuality during the Covid-19 pandemic? What are the gendered dimensions of this representation? We use Caldwell's concept of televisuality and ideas of visual grammar in news TV—with a special focus on gender portrayal and crisis communication—to answer these questions. To gain a holistic comprehension of gender representation in expert positions, not only but also for, the healthcare sector during the coronavirus crisis in Germany, we empirically translated our questions into the quantitative approach of audio-visual character analysis (ACIS), a specialized variation of content analysis tailored to audio-visual TV content (Prommer & Linke, 2019).

2. Crafting the Screen: Intersection of Televisuality in News Programmes, Character Portrayal, and Crisis Communication

The first report on the coronavirus on German television, broadcast on 10 January 2020, described a "mysterious lung disease" in China and initially appeared unremarkable (Rosenthal, 2021). Little could we know, it would spark a media trend that dominated (informational) television in the months that followed, as

the virus itself became a "media star." The German public broadcaster ARD/Das Erste, known for its high-quality journalism and broad audience reach, alone devoted over 20 hours of broadcasting time to coronavirus coverage from March to May 2020 (Goetz, 2022, p. 26).

It was not only the frequency of reporting, but also the televisual staging through strategies such as the selection and representations of experts that played a key role. The images and portrayals of people selected by journalists reflect and contribute to the construction of social realities (Döveling, 2019; Müller, 1997). Gender-inclusive representation in crisis communication for example promotes the idea that expertise is wide-ranging, reflecting diverse voices while exposing power dynamics and decision-making hierarchies. Caldwell's conceptual framework of televisuality gives critical focus to staging strategies in television and examines how visual and auditory means create meaning and emotions. This opens up a deeper analytical perspective on the role of television in public perception, especially in times of crisis. In light of this study's focus on experts during the pandemic, the concept of televisuality is examined with particular emphasis on news programmes and their key figures, followed by a brief insight into televisual crisis communication.

2.1. Framing Reality: The Televisual Nature of News Programmes

The concept of "televisuality" is a central theoretical model in media studies for analysing the particular aesthetics and production methods of television. Caldwell (1995) coined the term, describing a visual and stylistic intensification that sets television apart from other forms of media. However, this development is not just a question of aesthetics. Rather, Caldwell highlights that televisuality is a dynamic form of cultural representation that integrates diverse forms of expression and modes of representation. He emphasises: "Televisuality, as I have been using the term, is less a defining aesthetic than a kind of corporate behaviour and succession of guises" (Caldwell, 1995, p. 353). He thus underlines that televisuality is closely linked to the social and cultural contexts in which media production takes place. The news genre, characterised by staging modalities intended to convey seriousness, objectivity, and credibility, manifests televisuality in (a) the (moral) enhancement of the image, (b) the competitive media market, and (c) the dynamics of emotionalised information. Visuals are integral to content communication, as Caldwell (1995) explains: If an image lacks words, it's discarded, and if a word lacks an image, one is created. This underscores the role of images in reinforcing narratives and conveying values that enhance the credibility of reporting (Ekström, 2000; Messaris, 1997). The reliance on visuals is tied to the competitive media landscape, in which television adapts by optimising its visual presentation to remain relevant, using dynamic graphics and infographics to convey objectivity and trustworthiness (Caldwell, 1995; Fiske, 1987).

Visual staging is also crucial in engaging viewers emotionally, improving audience retention and processing (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Gunter, 2015). Visual design is crucial not only for staging but also for character portrayals, and this is especially so in the representation of experts. How experts are visually presented influences their perceived authority and credibility, reinforcing their role in the narrative. Goffman (1979, p. 28) observes that camera angles and positioning often subtly reinforce authority. The next section expands Goffman's observations and explores how expertise is established and emphasised through the televisuality of experts in news programmes.

2.2. Bringing Expertise to the Fore: The Televisuality of Experts in News Programmes

The televisual relevance of characters in news programmes is reflected in their deliberate staging, which goes beyond mere information delivery. Strategies like the "professional objective model" (Williams & Stroud, 2020), where journalists are expected to present unvarnished facts in a neutral manner to ensure objectivity, are used to gain and maintain viewer trust. The visual representation of different people (presenters, reporters, experts, etc.) is critical to reinforcing the genre's commitment to objectivity and reliability. In particular, the presentation of experts in news programmes is a precisely orchestrated process that goes far beyond the mere presentation of information. Their staging is of central importance for emphasising the credibility and authority of the experts and at the same time gaining the trust of the audience.

The visual design in which experts are shown follows a series of aesthetic principles that aim to create an atmosphere of seriousness and competence. Studies show that the environment in which experts are presented has a direct influence on how they are perceived by the audience. For example, scientific or professionally designed environments convey the impression of specialist knowledge and in-depth expertise, which strengthens the credibility of the opinions expressed (Ekström & Kroon Lundell, 2011; Günther et al., 2011; Maier et al., 2010). Non-verbal communication also plays a decisive role, as experts with calm body language, focused eye contact, and controlled gestures are seen as more trustworthy and competent. These signals are used specifically to support verbal communication and make the information presented appear particularly reliable (Keppler, 2015). The choice of camera angles is also important: Experts are frequently shown in medium or long shots to emphasize their environment and, by extension, their professional authority. This is achieved not only through "alternating camera angles" (Ekström & Kroon Lundell, 2011, p. 665) but particularly in situations that use dialogue (Ekström & Kroon Lundell, 2011). All of this goes beyond a simple aesthetic approach, revealing the deeper cultural and social significance outlined in Caldwell's reflections on televisuality (1995).

These findings emphasise the relevance of televisuality for the analysis of modern news reporting. It is not only the news content that counts, but also the way in which this content is presented. Expert presentations in news programmes are a highly complex and strategically planned process that aims to maximise the credibility of the information conveyed. The careful design of this staging (e.g., by the production team or crew), be it through the choice of background, camera angles, or non-verbal means of communication, is a central component of televisuality and makes a decisive contribution to how the audience perceives the information presented.

The importance of these staging mechanisms is particularly evident in crisis situations, where the credibility of the information conveyed and the emotional connection of the audience to the content presented are of the utmost importance. This is where televisual crisis communication unfolds its full effect by not only conveying facts, but also creating trust and emphasising the urgency of the situation through visual and performative elements. The following section takes a closer look at how these mechanisms are used in crisis communication on television and the specific challenges that arise for experts.

2.3. Broadcasting Urgency: Crisis Communication and the Art of Televisual Experts

Crises have a high news value for information programmes, as they have a profound impact on society and typically occur unexpectedly (Eilders, 2006; Zillich et al., 2011). These events require fast and precise reporting

that not only informs, but also reassures and guides. Crisis communication has an immediate, reactive, and time-limited as well as event-related character, and serves as a direct response to events that have occurred, with the aim of minimising damage (Drews, 2018; Günther et al., 2011; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Crisis-communicative structures are also evident in health contexts such as pandemics (Seeger et al., 2010). In these times of crisis, that occurred for instance during the Covid-19 pandemic, news presented in the media play a central role. Television, especially public broadcasting, was one of the most important sources of information for the German population during the pandemic (Arlt et al., 2023). The way in which crisis information was prepared and presented had a significant influence on the perception of the crisis and people's reactions to it. This demonstrates the power of televisuality in crisis communication: It is not only the content conveyed that is decisive, but also how and by whom it is presented. Gräf and Henning (2022) point out in the context of special corona broadcasts by public and private broadcasters in Germany that the "crisis-afflicted visual language" was sometimes exaggerated by deliberately choosing norm-breaking stylistic elements for news programmes (sepia-coloured, desaturated images, blurring), which underline the "nightmarish character" and "social powerlessness" (p. 8) and are combined with signalling words with negative connotations (e.g., "mutation stronghold"; p. 15). They point out that such images and narratives, in combination with other broadcast elements, coalesced to form a crisis rhetoric that was characterised by a narrow range of staging strategies.

The (continuous) presence of experts in news programmes is also essential and serves to stabilise the crisis narrative. The repeated presentation of particular experts can create a feeling of familiarity, which promotes acceptance and trust in the experts' statements. This familiarity is particularly important in long-lasting crises, as viewers seek reassurance and consistency in times of great uncertainty (Appinio, 2020; Dörner & Vogt, 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, numerous politicians and scientific experts became central figures in television news (Goetz, 2022). These experts acted not only as sources of information but also as symbolic stabilisers in a time of social upheaval (Kriesch, 2022).

In this context, it is important to scrutinise who is visible on screen in the crisis and in what function. The selection and representation of experts involves not only questions of gender equality but also intersectional factors like ethnicity and social background. Women, especially those from marginalized groups, are broadly underrepresented in the German media (Prommer et al., 2021). While the following analysis will primarily focus on gender, it is essential to acknowledge these intersectional dimensions to understand the full scope of visibility in Covid reporting (Thiele, 2019).

3. Empowering Few, Silencing Many: Inequality in Women's News Television Programme Roles

The systematic investigation of women's representation on German television began with the Küchenhoff study (Küchenhoff & Bossmann, 1975), revealing the underrepresentation of women, often portrayed as passive or silent. Despite social progress, this depiction of women has changed slowly (Prommer et al., 2021). Women remain underrepresented in many areas of the media, especially in crisis reporting, where they appear less frequently as reporters and experts and often in passive roles (Sutcliffe et al., 2005). The media industry continues to practice gender-specific segregation across its programming, including in terms of how women are portrayed (Caldwell, 2013). Women are frequently depicted in stereotypical, less visible roles and within limited contexts (Eilders, 1997, 2006; Ekström, 2000).

This section provides insights into the presence of women in informational programmes on German television, focusing first on their televisual staging in roles, followed by an analysis of their representation in news media during the coronavirus crisis.

3.1. Women in German Television News Programmes

Following the Küchenhoff study (Küchenhoff & Bossmann, 1975), German researcher Monika Weiderer extended the research in 1990, focussing on the presence and image of women on domestic television. She concluded that women appeared more often in news television, e.g., the number of women experts had increased from 0.9% in 1975 to 4.3% in 1990 (Klaus, 2005; Prommer & Linke, 2019). The topics associated with women also became more diverse (Weiderer, 1993). Nevertheless, she also found that women had less speaking time in informational programmes than men, sometimes less than half (women: 193s; men: 499s).

In 1997, the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research found that only 18% of experts in news programmes were women and they were more frequently present in "soft" news topics such as culture and society (Becker & Becker, 2001). An internal study by various European television stations, which analysed the German station ZDF, among others, for the German market in 1997/1998, found similar results (Eie, 1998). The study found that the proportion of women on air was 29% and showed topic-specific dependencies: The proportion of women, regardless of their position (expert, journalist, etc.), was higher when it came to human relationships, family, health, and social issues (Prommer & Linke, 2019).

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) not only tracks the proportion of women in the news but also examines whether women are thematically discussed. In 2010, women were featured in 28% of television news discussions (Journalistinnenbund, 2010). In 2015, however, the GMMP report showed little progress, even though the cut-off date of the 2015 study was marked by a shocking news event in Germany (25 March 2015): The crash of the German Wings plane in the French Alps. Additionally, the reporting on individual crash victims (two teachers and 14 schoolgirls) and public individuals (including Chancellor Angela Merkel, who issued an official statement on the tragedy) would have suggested an increase was to be expected (Journalistinnenbund, 2016).

In 2017, the MaLisa Foundation and the University of Rostock published their first report on audiovisual diversity in the German television landscape as part of a systematic and wide-ranging study of positions and topics in German television. They showed that women represented only 32% of people in informational programmes (Prommer & Linke, 2019). The only role in which there was parity was that of presenter, where young to middle-aged women tended to be more visible (47% in total). Women were selected to appear as experts only 21% of the time. In all other on-screen roles they were below parity. The follow-up study from 2021 reveals similar trends: The proportion of women in German informational programmes was 33%, while the proportion of women experts was 26% (Prommer et al., 2021).

It is particularly striking that women experts in the fields of health and nursing are already less prevalent than their male colleagues (2017: 28%; 2021: 26%; Prommer & Linke, 2019; Prommer et al., 2021). This paradox, given the predominantly female health sector and balanced gender ratio among doctors (e.g., German Medical Association, 2016), highlights how Prommer and colleagues' foundational work provides a crucial framework for analyzing gender portrayal. Building on this, our study explores how health crises, such as

Covid-19, affect these already distorted realities, focusing on crisis communication as a unique context for gendered televisuality. How health crises (such as the Covid-19 pandemic) can affect already distorted realities in information programming will be examined and demonstrated in more detail below using existing findings on Covid-19 television reporting at an international level. These insights will prove useful for our own study.

3.2. Women In Corona Television Reporting

Firstly, it is notable that experts became central figures in the media during the Covid-19 pandemic, serving as trustworthy sources of information and advice (Mihelj et al., 2022) during a period characterized alternatively by information scarcity and then overload. However, a look at the international studies on coronavirus reporting on television shows that there was a significant underrepresentation of women in the televisual portrayal of coronavirus experts worldwide as well as distorting moments in the portrayal of women as central figures in overcoming the pandemic. The GMMP report from 2021 found that despite an increase in the proportion of women in general reporting, their visibility in Covid-19-related television news decreased and they were portrayed in only 27% of the relevant reports (Macharia et al., 2021).

Studies by Al-Serhan et al. (2022) also confirm these results for Jordan, where men as experts were significantly more often and positively presented on television during the pandemic. In the UK, a study by the Expert Women Project found that in March 2020 there were almost three times as many men as women experts on leading TV and radio news programmes (2.7:1), the highest level in three years (Expert Women Project, 2020). In a comparative international study, Ioannidis et al. (2021) show women were present in only 12% to 24% of TV appearances of experts during the pandemic in the USA, Denmark, Greece, and Switzerland. In addition, Tezel et al. (2020) reveal that in the USA women made up just under a third of guests on primetime programmes and that conservative channels such as Fox News had a particularly low proportion of only 12% women speakers. Similar trends were also observed in Canada and Portugal (Araújo et al., 2022; Taboada, 2020). The underrepresentation of women in pandemic programming runs across different countries and media landscapes (Kassova, 2020).

Combining these findings with research on crisis communication shows that narrative structures on television often reinforce patriarchal structures during times of crisis (Dörner & Vogt, 2020; Journalistinnenbund, 2010, 2016; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). So, for example, during the pandemic, men were predominantly emphasised as rational and controlled, while women were portrayed as empathetic and supportive. This gendered narrative segregation reinforces stereotypical roles and reduces the visibility of women as decision-makers in crisis situations (Haupt et al., 2020; Lewis, 2021).

These insights from an international context show that women are definitely at risk of being marginalised and disappearing from the public stage in times of crisis, despite their significance in, not only but particularly, the health sector. However, in the context of corona reporting, there is currently still a deficit of analysis of the German television landscape. This research gap is addressed by this study, which focuses on the representation of experts from the German healthcare sector.

4. The Study: Hypotheses, Methods, and Sample

At the centre of this study is the question of how experts from the healthcare sector were portrayed on German news television during the Covid-19 pandemic and what role crisis-communicative televisuality played in this. The hypotheses, methodology, and central operationalization are presented below. Finally, the sample is described in order to gain a clear picture of gender-specific representation in crisis reporting.

4.1. Hypotheses

The development of the hypotheses is based on the theoretical foundations and previous research results on the gender-specific representation of experts on television, especially in the context of crisis-communicative televisuality during the Covid-19 pandemic:

> H1: During the Covid-19 pandemic, men experts from the healthcare sector are shown on German news television significantly more often and at higher hierarchical levels as well as in more prominent professional positions than their female colleagues, despite the overrepresentation of women in the healthcare sector.

Studies show a systematic underrepresentation of women in expert roles in German news media (Prommer & Linke, 2019; Prommer et al., 2021). This tendency is reinforced by crisis communication and was also visible internationally during the Covid-19 pandemic (Al-Serhan et al., 2022; Ioannidis et al., 2021):

> H2: During the Covid-19 pandemic, men experts from the healthcare sector appearing on German news television are more frequently invited to comment on rational, political subject areas, while women experts are significantly more frequently invited to comment on "soft" topics such as care and the social sector.

During the pandemic, the portrayal of men and women in the media was characterised by gender-specific stereotypes. Men tend to be shown in factual and rational contexts, while women are pushed into emotional and supportive roles, which contributes to the retraditionalisation of gender roles in times of crisis (Al-Serhan et al., 2022; Allmendinger, 2020; Caldwell, 1995; Ioannidis et al., 2021; Prommer & Linke, 2019).

While H1 focuses more on the frequency of representation and the hierarchical levels of the positions of men and women experts on television, H2 looks at the distribution of the subject areas (narratives) in which these experts appear and compares the frequency of this representation in specific subject areas. These descriptive hypotheses are suitable for exploratory research.

4.2. Methodology and Operationalisation

Caldwell's (1995) concept of televisuality, particularly televisual staging, is designed especially for individual analyses of the programmes provided. However, the aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive insight into television news programmes in Germany during the first coronavirus lockdown in Germany. Therefore, a particular challenge was to develop categories that address televisual aspects of the staging of persons without becoming too compartmentalised. In order to provide a comprehensive insight, the categories must

be designed to be applicable across different news formats and still capture the specific staging strategies used during the pandemic. This means that the categories need to be both specific enough to highlight differences and particularities in staging and general enough to allow for a coherent analysis across different programmes. The methodological approach we devised makes it possible to identify and analyse both individual differences and overarching trends in television news coverage during the lockdown.

4.2.1. Method

The stored television data were systematically analysed using a standardised content analysis. We used the ACIS method for this purpose (Linke & Prommer, 2021). ACIS stands for audio-visual character analysis and is a method that has proven successful in audiovisual content analyses with different programme types and media offerings (Prommer & Linke, 2017; Prommer et al., 2021, 2022; Wegner & Stüwe, 2021; Wegner et al., 2022). The quintessence of this approach, which is based on the methodological principles of the content analysis found in communication science, is the adoption of an unbiased and thus uninformed viewer perspective. From this perspective, the corona-related contributions were systematically analysed and coded. Adopting this approach not only sets a good standard for the coding process itself in the recording of audiovisual products, but also ensures high intercoder reliability of the data due to the consistent application of a neutral perspective throughout the analysis. Aggregated values were used to calculate reliability, as individual reliability values for each coding category could not be determined due to insufficient data in formal and content-specific categories. For this study, our five coders, who were student assistants with special training in coding audio-visual material, had an overall Holsti consistently above 0.85 (85% agreement) between the coding categories.

4.2.2. Characters and Experts

The selection of the characters is based on the televisual translation of their portrayal and functions for this study via their defined presence. They had to fulfil three staging conditions in order to be included in the analysis: (a) they had to be central and visible in the picture (e.g., medium long shot, full shot, close shot); (b) they had to speak audibly/loudly (e.g., as presenter or as expert in interview situations); and (c) their name had to be clearly visible/audible (e.g., via graphic caption or mentioned at least twice by reporters). For examples of characters used in the analysis, see Figures 1 and 2. This strict procedure allowed background figures to be deliberately faded out and televisual aspects to be consciously utilised in the expert staging.

Figure 1. Tagesschau (News show—ARD/Das Erste) I 17 April 2020 (8 pm).

Figure 2. Maischberger, Die Woche (Talk show—ARD/Das Erste) I 29 April 2020.

Since the study focuses on experts, these functions are described in more detail. Experts are defined as those characters who, at the first moment of perception, speak in the context of their professional role (e.g., representatives of the Robert Koch Institute, scientists, doctors). While titles (e.g., "Dr.") were optional, institutional affiliations of any kind were mandatory to substantiate their expertise. Their role is thus defined less by their personal involvement and more by their professional expertise. Expert roles were coded based on their professional context rather than private identities.

4.2.3. Categories

The determination of the gender of the people depicted is based on the studies using ACIS, which have already worked with information programmes (Prommer & Linke, 2017; Prommer et al., 2021). The "name gender" (Verhoeven, 2024) of the characters (e.g., Sandra Maischberger—woman; Lothar Wieler—man) is used to derive gender attributions for "man," "woman," and "diverse." This is followed by a further categorisation and more detailed analysis of the figure's professional fields and positions/hierarchies (e.g., profession), as well as the recording of the topics/narratives addressed by the experts.

4.3. The Sample

For the present study, television informational broadcasts were recorded in situ during the period from 16 April 2020 to 30 April 2020. The recordings, which included the German television informational programmes ARD/Das Erste, ZDF, RTL, and Sat.1, took place between 6 pm and midnight. The content was captured in real-time as the programs were aired and stored on external hard drives for further analysis. The recordings contain (a) the first informative television reporting on corona from the first lockdown in Germany in the spring of 2020, (b) the most-watched channels in Germany (public and private-commercial), and (c) the most-watched television time of day (evening to night programme). Television informational programmes are those that are clearly journalistic, present up-to-date and researched information, and are presented in established formats. In the defined period of 15 days, $N = 174$ TV information programmes were included in the analysis (Table 1). The focus was exclusively on content dealing explicitly with the coronavirus, which resulted in a total of 62 hours and 38 minutes of material.

Table 1. Sample of main broadcasters ($N = 174$).

ARD/Das Erste	ZDF	RTL	Sat.1
Tagesschau	*heute*	*RTL aktuell*	*Sat.1. Nachrichten*
Tagesthemen	*heute journal*	*Stern TV*	*Bild Corona Spezial*
ARD extra	*ZDF spezial*	Magazines	Magazines
Magazines	Magazines		
Reports	Reports		
Talk shows	Talk shows		
$N = 54$	$N = 58$	$N = 35$	$N = 27$

Please note as this is a complete survey for the time period, the following results are to be considered significant regardless of the test procedure. It should also be noted that only "women" and "men" were coded for the sample, meaning that only those gender categories are shown.

5. Results

In our sample of 2,240 characters across 174 recorded informational programmes, 1,299 characters (58%) were identified as experts related to the coronavirus, forming the largest group of all recorded individuals. Since the study focuses on their televisual role during Covid coverage, these results encompass all experts initially surveyed, before being further narrowed down to those specifically from the health sector.

5.1. Gender and Expertise in Pandemic Media: Representation Across Formats and Sectors

Of the 1,299 experts surveyed, 290 were coded as women (22%) and 1,009 as men (78%). This means that experts are the role with the lowest percentage of women in the sample (Figure 3).

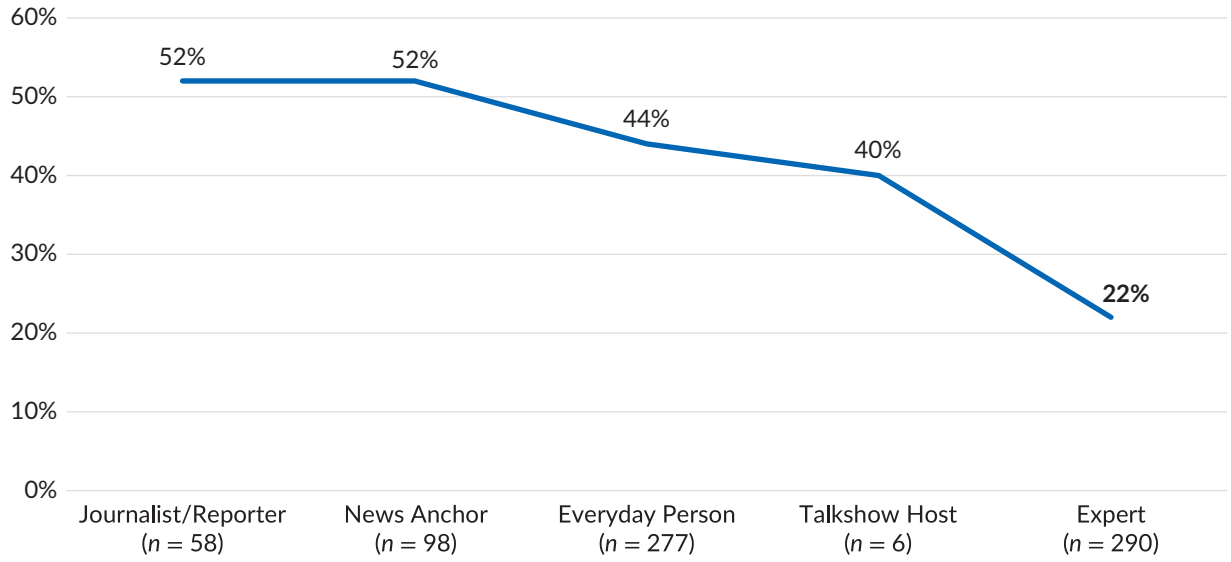

Figure 3. Gender distribution (women) of experts by role.

During the period covered, the proportion of women experts remained constant at around 22–23%. Public broadcasters such as ARD/Das Erste (25%) and ZDF (23%) featured more women in this role than the private broadcasters RTL (19%) and Sat.1 (17%). Women appeared most frequently in magazines, reports, and documentaries (30%), as well as interview and talk programmes (28%). There is thus a significant correlation between the length of the programme and the likelihood of women appearing as experts: In the longer formats (from 31 min), the proportion was up to 31%. Men therefore appeared more frequently in prominent, short special programmes.

The analysis also takes into account the experts' professions. This makes clear which professional fields are represented televisually in front of the camera and who is authorised to talk about certain topics in terms of gender-specific assignment. The majority of experts come from politics (women: 23%), followed by healthcare (women: 15%), and sales & services (women: 32%). Gender-specific differences are clear: Women are more represented in "soft" topic areas like the fashion & lifestyle sector (60%) while men dominate the financial sector (92%). Let's take a closer look at the experts from the healthcare sector.

5.2. Overworked, but Underrepresented: The Televisual Gender Covid-19 Gap

A total of 273 (21%) healthcare experts were identified for the period under review, including 41 women (15%) and 233 men (85%). These experts appeared most frequently in news programmes (68%, $n = 185$), followed by magazines (14%, $n = 39$), and special programmes (12%, $n = 33$). The gender ratios show that men experts clearly dominate the news programmes: They accounted for 87% ($n = 160$) of all appearances, while women made up only 14% ($n = 25$) of the experts. In magazine programmes, the proportion of women was slightly higher at 20%, but with a relatively small number of cases ($n = 8$).

Most women experts were shown on ARD/Das Erste (20%, $n = 16$), followed by ZDF (18%, $n = 17$). Private channels such as RTL and Sat.1 showed almost exclusively men experts with an average of 92% ($n = 89$). Here, too, there is a significant correlation between the length of a programme and the appearance of women as experts: The longer the content, the more likely they are to appear. Women experts from the healthcare sector also tend to be younger. They are most common in the age group up to 49 years, where they account for 30% ($n = 22$). In contrast, their male colleagues are significantly more frequently represented at an older age, e.g., in the 50+ category with a share of 91% ($n = 181$). This age gap is remarkable.

Of the 273 experts in the healthcare sector, 56% ($n = 154$) are in a management position, 18% ($n = 48$) are in a mid-level professional position, and 26% ($n = 72$) are in supporting or not clearly assignable positions. Overall, men were more frequently represented in management positions, with the proportion of men experts totalling 91% ($n = 140$), while the proportion of women experts was only 9% ($n = 14$). The discrepancy is less pronounced in middle professional positions, but still exists: Here, women make up 29% ($n = 14$), while men make up 71% ($n = 34$).

The most frequently featured experts were physicians, medical directors, and chief physicians, who made up 36% ($n = 95$) of the appearances, followed by (senior) virologists, epidemiologists, and infection researchers with 20% ($n = 54$). The proportion of nursing professionals represented was 2% ($n = 6$). These figures can also be broken down by gender. A closer look at the distribution of roles reveals that men dominate as health experts on television, both as heads of renowned institutes and as doctors without management roles. Among

all general practitioners and hospital doctors, 90% of interviewees were men and only 10% were women, despite women making up almost half (47%) of all doctors in Germany (Destatis, 2018). In fields like virology, where 45% of professionals are women, they remain underrepresented on screen—only 18% of all recorded virologists and epidemiologists were women. In the area of nursing, the ratio was reversed, with five women nurses (80%) compared to one male nurse (20%; Table 2).

Table 2. Health areas of the experts by gender (selection).

	Women	%	Men	%	Total
Doctor Total	10	10	89	90	99
Medical Directorate/Chief Physicians	0	0	43	100	43
Doctor (various specialities, anaesthesia, hygiene/environmental medicine, etc.) at management level	4	15	22	85	26
Doctor (various specialities, anaesthesia, hygiene/environmental medicine, etc.) in mid-level professional position	6	20	24	80	30
Epidemiologists/Virologists Total	4	18	18	82	22
Epidemiologists/Virologists Chief	1	7	13	93	14
Epidemiologists/Virologists Normal	3	38	5	63	8
Psychologists Total	3	75	1	25	4
Psychologist at management level	1	100	0	0	1
Psychologist in mid-level professional position	2	67	1	33	3
Nursing Total	5	83	1	17	6
Nursing at management level	2	100	0	0	2
Nursing staff	—	—	—	—	—
(Vice) Praesidium of healthcare organisations and associations (Robert Koch Institute/Paul-Ehrlich, German Medical Association, Society for Pneumology, Hospital Association, etc.)	2	4	50	96	52

When analysing the individuals by name, an additional, clear imbalance is noticeable. The sample lists 149 men experts and 37 women experts. Among the men, Lothar Wieler, president of the Robert Koch Institute, appears most frequently (15 appearances), followed by Lars Schaade, his vice president (11 appearances), Georg Christian Zinn, laboratory director of a hygiene centre (8 appearances), Christian Drosten, senior virologist at Charité (6 appearances), and Alexander Kekulé, senior virologist at Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg (five appearances). Among the women, Melanie Brinkmann, virologist at the Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research, appears most frequently (three appearances), followed by Cornelia Betsch, psychologist at the University of Erfurt, and virologist Ulrike Protzer (two appearances each). The remaining women experts appear only once each in front of the camera. This shows that men are staged much more frequently and repeatedly as experts, while women appear in the media much less frequently and less continuously—often only once.

5.3. Prescription for Silence: Intersectional Imbalances in Televisual Covid-19 Narratives

For all experts (N = 1,299), the topics discussed on camera were recorded using a multiple coding process to comprehensively capture their televisual narratives. The top three topics overall were political topics (26%,

n = 563), business/finance (19%, *n* = 412), and medical topics (18%, *n* = 387). Among healthcare experts (*n* = 273), medical topics dominated with 51% (*n* = 217), followed by care/nursing (15%, *n* = 63), and social services (12%, *n* = 51). Overall, 56% of medical topics and 59% of nursing topics were presented by healthcare experts.

The focus of health experts' topics varied by genre. Medical topics led in news programmes (80%, *n* = 148) and magazines/reports/documentaries (76%, *n* = 32). Political topics were significant in special programmes (21%, *n* = 7) and news (10%, *n* = 19), while care/nursing and social issues were present across genres but played a lesser role in news (care/nursing: 15%, *n* = 27; social issues: 15%, *n* = 28) and special programmes (care/nursing: 36%, *n* = 12; social issues: 12%, *n* = 4). A gender-specific analysis shows that women experts from the healthcare sector spoke predominantly about medical topics, with 68% (*n* = 28) of their contributions belonging to this area. In comparison, men experts addressed medical topics even more frequently, with a share of 82% (*n* = 189). Care/nursing was a similar important topic for both genders. Furthermore, women experts were more strongly represented in the social area, with 27% (*n* = 11) of their contributions dedicated to these topics. Political topics played a role for both genders, but the proportion was slightly higher for men at 17% (*n* = 39) than for women at 15% (*n* = 6; Figure 4).

Senior male healthcare experts dominate in "strong" topics, contributing 62% (*n* = 24) in politics and 53% (*n* = 8) in economics. Even in medical discussions, they lead with 63% (*n* = 119) of contributions. In contrast, women in leadership roles are more focused on "weaker" topics, contributing only 29% (*n* = 8) to medical issues and showing less presence in politics and economics. However, in mid-level positions, where more women are represented, they engage more with medical topics (36%, *n* = 10) and social issues (36%, *n* = 4), reinforcing a thematic division between men and women.

The most notable difference is that younger experts, especially women, focus more on social and care issues, while older men dominate discussions on politics and economics, and have a stronger presence in medical topics. Younger women contribute 14% to medical discussions and are visible in care/nursing (22%) and social topics (9%). In contrast, older experts (50+) dominate in politics (77%) and economics (73%), while also leading in medical discussions (78%), reinforcing their authority across critical areas.

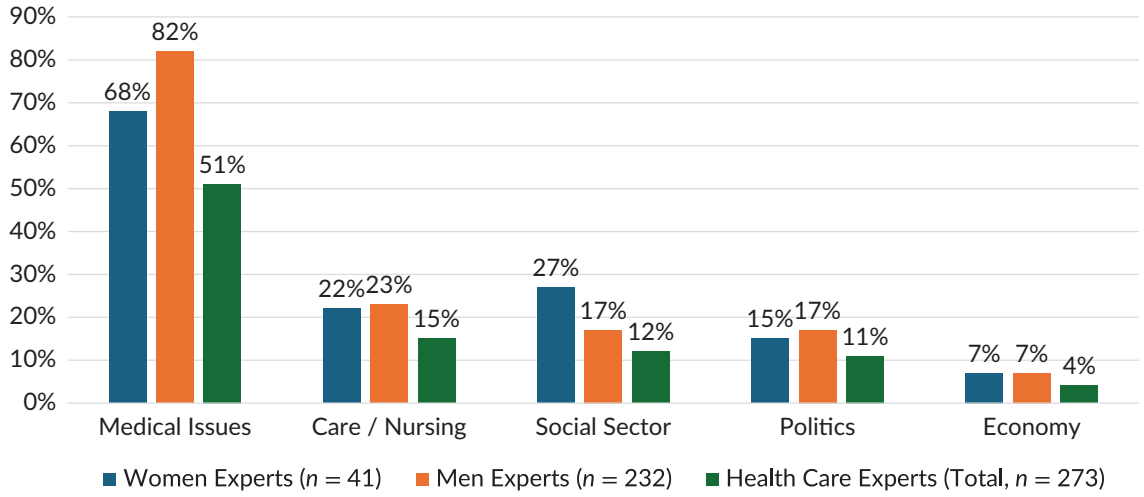

Figure 4. Topics of the health experts by gender (selection).

This focus on specialized topics could lead to younger women's contributions being seen as less central, while the dominance of older men in politically and economically decisive areas strengthens their authority. This highlights how gender and age intersect to shape the Covid narrative and the televisual presence of health experts.

Finally, a brief overview of the range of topics covered by the most frequently featured health experts on television shows notable gender differences. The analysis reveals that Lothar Wieler, head of the Robert Koch Institute, focused exclusively on medical topics in all 15 of his appearances. In contrast, his deputy, Lars Schaade, showed a more diverse narrative, contributing to political and economic (five times) and social topics (two times). Georg Christian Zinn also focused on medical issues but engaged with other subject areas. Among women, Helmholtz virologist Melanie Brinkmann, though appearing only three times, demonstrated the most holistic approach. She addressed medical, political, economic, and social topics, while psychologist Cornelia Betsch also showed a broad narrative range in her two appearances. Virologist Ulrike Protzer, however, stayed within the medical field in her two appearances. This shows that men health experts on television during the Covid-19 pandemic tended to focus on a singular topic in the narrative, while women experts, despite fewer appearances, offered more diverse narratives (Figure 5).

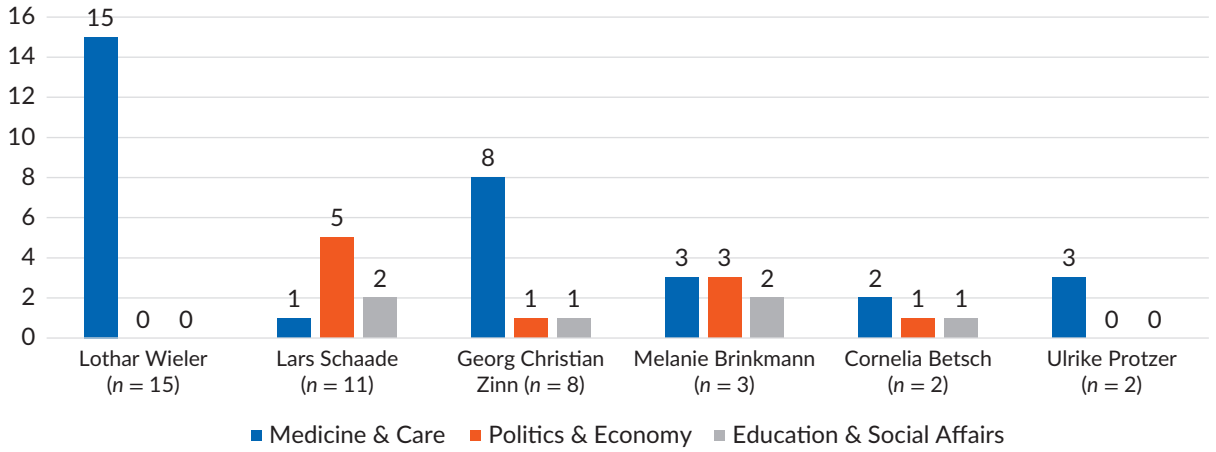

Figure 5. Selected health experts and topics using specific examples.

6. Discussion

This study sought to address the research question: How were healthcare experts represented on German news television during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly within the framework of crisis-communicative televisuality? To explore this, the study incorporated Caldwell's (1995) concept of televisuality and analyzed the staging strategies of experts in news broadcasts, with a special focus on gender representation, especially in German informational programmes and prior studies on Covid reporting.

The theoretical principles outlined are now reflected on and categorized in connection with the study's findings. The following discussion is guided by the two key hypotheses presented in Section 4.1.

6.1. Gendered Hierarchies and Visibility: Experts Under the Corona Lens

H1 is clearly confirmed on the basis of the available data. The analysis of the televisually staged and portrayed experts in television information reporting during the first corona lockdown reveals their importance in crisis communication on the one hand, but also striking gender differences on the other. Fifty-eight percent of all recorded individuals were staged as experts, confirming their central role in the media (Mihelj et al., 2022). Of the 273 healthcare experts, only 15% were women, predominantly young and not in leading positions. In prominent short news formats with an average broadcast length of 15 minutes, the proportion of women even fell by one percentage point. This is in stark contrast to the actual situation in the healthcare sector, which—apart from management positions—is dominated by women (see German Medical Association, 2016; Prommer & Linke, 2019). A particularly revealing observation in this context is that even women in the highest positions do not automatically enjoy a higher media presence. For instance, German Chancellor Angela Merkel had 31 news appearances, while Markus Söder, a federal state leader (Bavaria), had nearly the same with 30 appearances. Despite their differing ranks, this near parity suggests that even women in high positions must compete for visibility, as their authority isn't automatically acknowledged. This highlights how traditional gender roles still shape media reporting, where a woman's hierarchical status holds less sway (Eilders, 2006; Prommer & Linke, 2019; Prommer et al., 2021).

Another striking difference can be seen in the frequency of appearances by the health(care) experts: Lothar Wieler, president of the Robert Koch Institute, appeared 15 times, while the most prominent woman expert, Melanie Brinkmann, only made three appearances. This imbalance underscores the media's preference for male voices and authorities in health communication (Arlt et al., 2023; Ekström & Kroon Lundell, 2011).

The repeated staging of (the same) male experts helps them become more familiar and trusted in a parasocial context for the audience, especially in crises when the public relies on expert guidance through television (see Appinio, 2020; Arlt et al., 2023; Dörner & Vogt, 2020). This dominant male presence fosters the narrative of the steady man guiding the public through uncertainty and overcoming the crisis, reinforcing the notion that men's opinions are considered more valid and trustworthy during a pandemic. This dynamic risks sidelining valuable insights and perspectives from women experts and diminishing the diversity and quality of crisis-related health communication (see Prommer et al., 2021).

The television portrayal of male health experts as the primary authorities during the pandemic therefore reinforces traditional gender roles. Women, if portrayed at all, often appear in supportive or non-leading roles, perpetuating the societal norm that men lead and women follow (Eilders, 1997; Prommer & Linke, 2019). This dynamic reduces the visibility of women in leadership positions and downplays their essential contributions, particularly in fields like healthcare, where women are the majority (Journalistinnenbund, 2016; Sutcliffe et al., 2005).

This gender imbalance in media representation has serious consequences for the healthcare sector. It devalues the significant role women play in a pandemic response, which could demoralize female professionals and worsen existing gender disparities in career progression and decision-making (Günther et al., 2011; Prommer et al., 2021). Moreover, the focus on male expertise may hinder the development of well-rounded health strategies by neglecting diverse perspectives.

6.2. Thematic Gender Bias in Expert Portrayals: Unmasking the Corona Divide

H2 can also be confirmed considering the results. Health experts ensured that medical, social, and care topics made up 51% of the total coverage. Their expertise played a key role in bringing these issues to the forefront of televised discussions. A closer look at the gender-specific distribution within these subject areas reveals significant gendered differences in the frequency of presentation. Men experts dominated in the presentation of medical topics, while women experts had a significantly stronger presence in social and care-related areas.

It is particularly striking that men experts in leading positions covered a wider range of topics, including political and economic issues. This is consistent with previous research findings, which suggest that men are often portrayed in the media as rational and objective, particularly in politically relevant contexts. Women in leadership positions, on the other hand, tended to be limited to more specific topics such as care and social issues, which is in line with existing stereotypes that locate women in more emotional or supportive roles (see Eilders, 2006; Ekström, 2000; Prommer & Linke, 2019; Prommer et al., 2021). The analysis also shows age-related differences in thematic orientation. Younger women experts focused more on social and care-related topics, while older men experts spoke on more politically and economically dominant topics. This observation is in line with the findings of Prommer et al. (2021), which show that younger women are often used in the media in less central or less prestigious subject areas.

Küchenhoff's 1975 observation, "Men act, women appear" (Küchenhoff & Bossmann, 1975), remains relevant in the portrayal of health experts during the first Covid-19 lockdown. Our intersectional analysis reveals that media coverage reinforced gender and age stereotypes. Older men are perceived as more dominant and authoritative voices in political and economic discussions while women and younger experts were sidelined and reduced to less valued central topics (Keppler, 2015). These findings suggest that the gendered and age-related distribution of topics on television may contribute to cementing existing power structures and role models in public perception. Research shows that the way in which experts are presented on television significantly influences how their expertise and authority are perceived by the audience (Günther et al., 2011). This televisual competence gap, shaped by age, gender, and profession, perpetuates power structures and societal roles, limiting the visibility and perceived authority of women and younger experts in key social discourses, contributing to the "retraditionalization" of roles (Allmendinger, 2020).

In addition, the detailed analysis of Covid-19 narratives uncovers clear differences in the portrayal of male and female health experts on television. While male experts like Lothar Wieler tend to focus narrowly on medical topics, women experts such as Melanie Brinkmann covered a much broader range of topics, despite being less present, by talking about medical as well as political, economic, and social issues.

The analysis thus reveals a holistic approach in the narratives of women, whereas men tend to be coded as mono-focused. This breadth of coverage can enhance the perceived versatility of women experts, but it may also dilute their authority in specific fields (Maier et al., 2010). In contrast, the mono-focused portrayal of men strengthens their role as specialized experts, reinforcing their televisual authority, albeit at the expense of a more comprehensive discussion of the topics. At the same time, however, this one-sided focus can lead to other important aspects of a topic being neglected. The extent to which the audience follow and evaluate these differences is subject to further research.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of Covid-19 television reporting in Germany reveals that structural factors within media production influence gender roles, particularly during crises. Caldwell's concept of televisuality elucidates how aesthetic and narrative techniques amplify gendered disparities. Repeated visual framing of male experts as authoritative figures, juxtaposed against women in supportive roles, underscores entrenched power dynamics. Camera strategies and unequal speaking time further exacerbate these inequalities, as evidenced by the disproportionate visibility of male healthcare leaders.

These findings highlight the potential erosion of public trust caused by unequal media representation. Perpetuating gender stereotypes risks alienating diverse audiences and undermining inclusive public discourse. Increasing the visibility of women would contribute to a more accurate societal portrayal, build public trust, and enhance crisis communication effectiveness.

Targeted action from various stakeholders is essential. Media teams should prioritize gender-balanced expert selection, while institutions and organizations can promote female spokespeople and provide media training. The higher visibility of women on public broadcasters would also benefit from diversity mandates or evolving audience expectations, reflecting societal shifts toward gender inclusivity. Policymakers could implement guidelines or incentives to ensure equitable representation in crisis communication and public discourse.

The study highlights how televisual elements, such as expert portrayal and narrative construction, can be quantified, shedding light on gender-specific differences in media representation and their impact on public perception. However, the study's methodological design limits its ability to capture all nuances of televisual aesthetics and stylistic staging. Future research, using anchor examples or case studies, could deepen the understanding of how gender roles are mediated in television reporting. While this study provides valuable insights into the visibility of female experts, it does not examine the underlying factors that drive their underrepresentation. Expert selection is influenced by multiple factors, including the availability of spokespeople and recruitment strategies, which were not explored here. Future research should investigate these mechanisms, taking into account institutional practices and media production dynamics. Combining quantitative data with qualitative methods, such as interviews with production staff, would address these gaps and offer a more comprehensive understanding of gender representation in crisis communication.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author

Juliane Wegner (MA) is a PhD student at the Institute for Media Research at the University of Rostock, Germany. As a media and communication scholar, her research focuses on media socialization, media literacy, and the role of digital communication in contemporary society. She also works in the field of adult education, specializing in media didactics and digital literacy, with a focus on practical applications in educational settings.

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ARTICLE

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When Latin American Melodrama Meets Nordic Noir: How SVOD Reshapes Chilean TV Fiction

Consuelo Ábalos

Department of Communication, Pontificia Universidad Católica, Chile

Correspondence: Consuelo Ábalos (cdabalos@uc.cl)

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Abstract

This article aims to understand the impact of subscription video-on-demand commissions on locally produced content in Latin America's smaller markets. It focuses on the case of *42 Days of Darkness* (2022), the first Netflix Original in Chile produced without the participation of local broadcast channels nor with contributions from state funds. Through a contextualized textual analysis of the series, focusing on Netflix's strategic approach to national/global production, a shift has been identified in both the look and practice of national TV series programming with this new stakeholder. Although the local industry has already ventured into the detective genre based on local crimes, Netflix's first production in Chile adopted narratives and visual motifs congruent with melancholic elements of Nordic noir. We conclude that one of Netflix's main strategies in this project was to embrace the global popularity of the Scandinavian genre's aesthetics while maintaining elements of Latin American melodrama, a predominant genre in the region, in order to appeal to local audiences, creating content with a negotiated, "glocal" appeal. The participation of subscription video-on-demand giants in small industries such as Chile could help to create captivating TV series and energize the local audiovisual production industry. However, it might lead to the homogenization of content and the erasure of cultural specificity.

Keywords

Chile; Latin American melodrama; melodrama; Netflix; Nordic noir; SVOD; SVOD originals

1. Introduction

Until the 2000s, serialized TV fiction production in Chile was not of particular interest to local television channels (Parodi & Quiroz, 2021). Since it was not considered profitable, fictional TV series were almost exclusively made via funding from the National Television Council (Consejo Nacional de Televisión [CNTV]),

which became their production engine (Sanhueza, 2018). This content stood out for its success in reflecting the realities and features of Chilean social idiosyncrasy (Mateos-Pérez & Ochoa, 2019, p. 13). The origin of their financing shaped what Chilean TV series would become.

The eruption of international streaming platforms changed how we conceive of television (Lotz et al., 2018) and subverted production logic in several parts of the world (Scarlata et al., 2021), with Netflix as the main "dominant challenger to linear television, viewing practices, and nationalized media systems" (Jenner, 2018, p. 3). As in the rest of Latin America, Netflix started streaming in Chile in September of 2011, three years before the service was available in countries like Austria, Belgium, France, or Germany. Since then, it has become the most successful streaming platform in the country. According to the national TV survey, in terms of streaming services subscriptions, Netflix leads with 93%, Disney+ (including Star+) holds 44%, and Prime Video has 41% (CNTV, 2024, p. 15). Even though subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms do not inform how many subscribers they have, the large increase in data consumption versus the decrease in paid TV in Chile suggests that SVODs have become important content suppliers in the country (Observatorio Iberomericano de la Ficción Televisiva [OBITEL], 2024, p. 110). Although Chile is not one of the main Latin American markets, the rise of SVOD consumption habits might have encouraged companies like Netflix to commission original content there. The arrival of a new stakeholder might introduce changes in the thematic offer and visual motifs that emerge in locally produced fictional series, but to what extent?

This article focuses on the case of the first Netflix original produced in Chile, commissioned by local production company Fábula, but without the participation of any local broadcast channels or contributions from state funds (Antezana Barrios, 2024). The series *42 Days of Darkness* (2022) is a crime thriller based on a true case: the disappearance of Viviana Haeger on June 29, 2010, in Puerto Varas, southern Chile. Haeger was a married mother with two daughters who disappeared from her house one morning after her husband went to work. The press widely covered the case, and huge resources were implemented to find the missing woman. Oddly enough, Haeger's body was found in an attic, in her own house, 42 days later. Her husband was charged with the murder, along with an accomplice, but was ultimately acquitted due to a lack of evidence. The series is partially based on the book *Usted Sabe Quién: Notas Sobre el Homicidio de Viviana Haeger*, a journalistic investigation by Rodrigo Fluxá.

Combining close textual analysis of the six episodes of the series with a contextualized analysis of Netflix's strategic approach to national/global production in Latin America, we identified a shift in how original content is being produced in Chile. Melancholic elements (Waade, 2017), such as emotionally complex characters, landscapes, lighting, and music associated with the Scandinavian genre were recognized. Although the local audiovisual industry had already ventured into the detective genre based on local crimes, this production has a different televisuality (the look and the practice of TV programming), which embraces the global popularity that Nordic noir has achieved (Stougaard-Nielsen, 2016). We argue that while one of Netflix's main strategies in this project was to draw on Nordic noir aesthetics, they also sought to include some elements from Latin American melodrama. This traditional genre has predominated audiovisual content (Martín-Barbero, 1995) in the region. The strategy was successful in this case, as it ranked seventh among the most successful non-English series during its first week on the platform, accumulating 9.9 million hours watched since its premiere (Equipo de Culto, 2022).

The participation of SVODs in local audiovisual ecosystems can create compelling and recognizable TV series aimed at audiences used to "glocal" streaming narratives and energize the local audiovisual production industry.

But it might also lead to the homogenization of content and the erasure of "its sociocultural context in the process" (Petruska & Woods, 2019, p. 72) which could disengage local audiences. We conclude that to avoid this phenomenon, Netflix has evolved its approach to commissioning original content.

2. Netflix and the "Localization" of Transnational Content in Latin America

The main strategy that SVODs implement to consolidate themselves in international media markets has been to promote the creation of "original" content. This title is a broad and non-transparent category that describes multiple forms of production and degrees of involvement of streaming companies (Pedro, 2022). Afilipoaie et al. (2021) identified four different investment patterns in Netflix Originals: licensed original, continuation deals, co-producing/co-financing, and full originals. This last category corresponds to those series or films commissioned by SVOD companies from local production companies to create exclusive and original content. Once production is completed, the platform retains distribution rights around the world. This strategy was used by Netflix in Chile for its first commissioned fictional TV series.

SVOD platforms have made an important impact on the way production cultures work (Idiz, 2024), taking the transnationalization of content to its highest point (Lobato, 2019; Lotz & Lobato, 2023). Transnationalization "proposes a negotiation of cross-border dynamics, including policy, audience reception, creative culture, the patterns and the diversity of players involved in production and fragmentation of markets" (Iordache et al., 2022, p. 237). This transnational content has been around for quite a long time, thanks to cross-border channels and the impact of cable television (Chalaby, 2005). However, international co-productions suitable for different national audiences traveled mainly in a one-way direction, particularly from English-speaking countries to the rest of the world. For instance, HBO Latin America produced transnational content in Chile (co-produced with Fábula) for the first time in 2010 (Antezana Barrios, 2024). *Prófugos* (2011–2013) was produced in Spanish with a local cast and distributed to a Latin American audience. Another example is *Sitiados* (2015–2019), which was made in Chile by Fox International, this time with actors from different Latin American countries who spoke with a neutral accent. Both series engaged with audiences within their cultural proximity zone (Straubhaar, 1991) but never got to "travel" West.

In contrast, commissioned content created by SVOD platforms is conceived from their origin under a logic of "glocalization" (Robertson, 1995), which sets universal stories that appeal to a global world in local contexts that wink at belonging to a national audience. Furthermore, it allows global audiences to watch content that otherwise would not have been available in their regions. Therefore, the concept of transnationality within SVOD platforms implies a spatial and cultural shift in how audiences are conceived. As argued by Sundet (2016) "audience making" in the age of media convergence demands a different approach to fulfill the expectations of both national and international audiences. For Latin American audiences who have considered television as its main source of entertainment and information, the televisual world "is expanding…as audiences experience different screens and audiovisual possibilities" (Orozco & Miller, 2016, p. 3). Despite limitations of access or an evident "appeal among the upper middle class and elite, who have the cultural capital to enjoy and appreciate it" (Straubhaar et al., 2019, p. 233), the interest of SVOD companies to expand production efforts in the continent is evident. This aligns with the engagement of Latin American audiences with one of their favorite content formats, TV fiction (OBITEL, 2024), specifically *telenovelas* (Parrot Analytics, 2018).

Although the Latin American audiovisual industry is quite heterogeneous, with giants like Mexico or Brazil and smaller industries like Chile, Peru, or Uruguay, SVOD platforms have been interested in the region since their beginning. Netflix began its expansion outside the United States first to Canada in 2010, and just one year later to Latin America. According to Albornoz and Krakowiak (2023) this strategy was based on two main factors: large audiences were accustomed to consuming American content; and "the penetration of pay-tv in some Latin American countries, especially among the middle and upper social classes, provided fertile ground for the streamer to market its product" (p. 129). Netflix's localization strategy (Lobato, 2019) followed a similar regional pattern, with different emphases according to market size. Mexico, "the biggest and most influential Spanish-speaking country" (Orozco & Miller, 2016, p. 3) and the biggest media market in Latin America, was where localization strategies were tested. Following Cornelio-Marí (2020), this was done first by "creating a specific version of the site for the market, dubbing and subtitling…[and] next, licensing local content and lastly, going into original production" (p. 7). Accordingly, it was the first SVOD to venture into creating original content on the continent in 2015, with the series *Club de Cuervo* produced in Spanish by a Mexican production company (García Leiva et al., 2021). The bet was successful and spurred the expansion of local commissioned production to other large regional markets.

Brazil is the second-largest market in the company's regional expansion. According to Rocha and Arantes (2023), it meets all the conditions to become a successful business plan. It has a large population (speaking the same language, Portuguese), a growing middle class, and adequate infrastructure. Netflix started commissioning original content in 2016, with the post-apocalyptic thriller *3%* (2016–2020), choosing a genre made to succeed. But they have also embraced local genres like *telenovelas* in *Girls From Ipanema* (2019), "negotiating and reconfiguring the traditional features of the Latin American Melodrama to serve its own transnational business model" (p. 127). Another important country in the region is Argentina. Serpe (2023) describes it as the third biggest media market in Latin America, which has enthusiastically embraced SVODs. Consequently, streaming services have acquired and commissioned Argentinian fictional content, drawing on a well-experienced local industry. He argues that Argentine SVOD content "builds on the tropes and talent that emerged from New Argentine Cinema, a movement characterized by its low-budget social dramas and incisive representation of the impact of neoliberal policies in the country" (Serpe, 2023, p. 109). The content produced since the first Argentinian original *Edha* (2018), has evolved from thrillers associated with complex TV (Mittell, 2015) to biographical and other fact-based dramas providing "both domestic and international spectators with a repository of national popular culture" (Serpe, 2023, p. 118).

Comparatively, Colombia is a smaller market but has an important tradition in content production for the region, especially exporting *telenovelas*. Unlike other markets, Netflix's commissioning strategy has benefited from the support of public policies that favor audiovisual industry development in the country. In 2012, Law 1556 (known as Location Colombia) was enacted, propelling "Colombian audiovisual panorama to its definitive turn towards SVOD series, and one of its first beneficiaries was Netflix with the series *Narcos* (Padilha, 2015–2017)" (Uribe-Jongbloed et al., 2021, p. 75). This law provides reimbursements for the production costs of foreign companies that develop their films in Colombian territory, which has recently supported the production of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (2024). Following Heredia Ruiz (2022), Netflix Originals strategy can be outlined in a commitment to content localization through alliances with locally recognized production companies and diverse stories that can travel globally with a catalog. However, she argues these "original" stories might be "chosen based on the cultural stereotype of Latin America, associated with soap operas, drug trafficking, crimes, soccer, corruption, etc." (Heredia Ruiz, 2022, p. 26).

2.1. TV Fiction Within the Chilean Audiovisual Ecosystem

Recently, smaller markets like Chile have become interesting for streaming companies like Netflix and others, mainly because of their high internet penetration rates—97% (Newman et al., 2024)—and "increase in the volume of downstream data, presumably driven by streaming on demand" (OBITEL, 2024, p. 117). They follow a similar strategy to develop original, exclusive, and global productions throughout the region (Heredia-Ruiz et al., 2021). The first link between local audiovisual ecosystems and SVOD is through distribution. Thus, some successful Chilean broadcast TV series were acquired for streaming distribution. In 2017, Netflix purchased two seasons of *El Reemplazante* (2012–2014) and the series *Juana Brava* (2015) for its catalog (Nuñez, 2017), both produced by local production companies with the aid of public funds. At the same time, Amazon Prime Video acquired for its catalog the series *Los 80* (2008–2014), a popular show for local audiences. Two years later, they ventured to increase their participation in local production with *El Presidente* (2019), a collaboration between international production companies and a local one, Fábula. This business partnership continued with the two seasons of *La Jauría* (2020–2022), which was inspired by the Spanish *La Manada* rape case and the #MeToo movement. Hence, when Netflix decided to commission its first original series in Chile, they chose Fábula, the most important local production company. Not only did they have experience producing an international TV series, but they were also known throughout the continent for their successful film productions, including Chile's first Oscar for best foreign language film, *A Fantastic Woman* (2017).

Until the late 90s, the Chilean audiovisual ecosystem focused on a particular kind of TV fictional content. Local broadcast channels relied on *telenovelas* whose length better justified production expenses and ensured higher audience levels. Furthermore, TV series were seen as "an audiovisual product of lower rank" (Parodi & Quiroz, 2021, p. 28), as they were closer to low-budget sitcoms. To improve the quality and diversity of TV content, CNTV launched competitive funds (Fondo-CNTV) for independent production companies and broadcast channels to finance part of their projects. As Chile does not have a public media system and what is considered the public broadcast channel must finance itself through advertisement (Godoy, 2000), this public policy allowed the production of high-quality content for open broadcast television (Sanhueza, 2018) and promoted TV fictional series as a valued audiovisual product within local audiences.

In addition, by the first decade of the 21st century, Chile celebrated two commemorative dates that favored the development of fictional productions. In 2010, the country celebrated the bicentennial anniversary of its independence. Hence, a strong corpus of TV series depicting historical events like the independence process (Mateos-Pérez & Ochoa, 2019) or the Pacific War (Antezana & Santa Cruz, 2023) was made. For instance, *Héroes* (2007–2008) portrayed the lives of the main independence leaders who freed Chile from Spanish rule, and *Adiós al Séptimo de Línea* (2010) told the story of a Chilean spy during the war with Bolivia and Peru. Another important milestone was commemorating the 30th anniversary of the *coup d'état* in 2013, which led to the production of a TV series that, for the first time, depicted on television the traumatic events around Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. Within this context, we find series like *Los Archivos del Cardenal* (2011–2014), which showcased the work of human rights lawyers dealing with forced disappearance cases, and *Ecos del Desierto* (2013), which was based on the real-life of Carmen Hertz, a human rights lawyer whose husband was kidnapped and killed by what is known as the Caravan of Death. These fictional representations produced an important debate about the importance of mediatic memory and how different generations react to the representation of traumatic events (Antezana Barrios & Cabalin, 2018). A good example of this

period's TV series is *Los 80* (2008–2014), which works as a historical and a mediatic memory for younger audiences. It follows the everyday life of the Herrera family, a middle-class couple with two teenage children and a younger son, from 1982 until the end of the dictatorship in 1989. The show ran for seven seasons and had a huge audience success during its first four seasons, as it portrayed daily life during that decade without delving into political issues. However, as the episodes progressively included human rights violation topics, such as the eldest daughter falling in love with a member of the Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez, a guerilla organization against Pinochet, and the inclusion of torture scenes in what was considered a family show, some local audiences lost interest in the series (Antezana Barrios & Sepúlveda, 2022).

Another trope that emerged within the last decade was a sort of disenchantment with what was expected from democratic governments, namely improvements within the pension, education, and health systems. This was explored in some realistic portraits of Chile's neoliberal crisis with a social and political narrative referring to the post-dictatorship period of transition to democracy (Hardy, 2020; Martin-Cabrera, 2023). As Chilean society had been experiencing profound transformations, including a crisis of institutional trust and an increase in the perception of social injustice (Frei, 2024), some of these productions could be seen as a premonitory vision tracing the social unrest that had been accumulating for years during the democratization process and that erupted in a serious social outbreak on October 18th, 2019 (Cabello, 2021). For instance, series like *El Reemplazante* (2012–2014) showed Chile's precarious public school system, or *Bala Loca* (2016) which explored imaginaries about journalism and the media in a post-dictatorial and neoliberal society (Faure et al., 2024) based on real corruption issues. Equally important was the production of crime dramas based on true local cases, for example, *La Cacería* (2018), based on the life of a well-known serial killer or *Zamudio*, *Perdidos en la Noche* (2015), which was inspired by a high-profile hate crime against a member of the LGBTQ+ community. These stories had high levels of audience and an impact on the public sphere, mainly because they depicted local identity, cultural processes, and open debates around issues that were important in Chilean society (Cabalin & Antezana, 2020).

As shown above, Chilean TV fictional series were conceived as a mirror of local social issues and real-life events. They also helped the country to develop a small but specialized audiovisual industry, which drew attention from SVOD platforms. During the last few years, local productions have acquired some elements from the quality/complex TV shows developed abroad. Accordingly, TV series have fewer episodes, prioritize natural light and real settings, and have a more natural acting style, etc. Nonetheless, we still find a lot of indoor scenes, artificial lighting, emotional performances shot in a very close frame, melodramatic music, etc. All these elements have some degree of aesthetic connection with *telenovelas*, which in Chile are still widely consumed (CNTV, 2023) and are well-regarded even by younger audiences (Antezana et al., 2022).

2.2. Latin American Melodrama Meets Nordic Noir

Melodrama can be traced back to French theater and can be characterized by heightened emotions told through narrative and aesthetic resources. According to Brooks (1976), "the connotation of the word includes indulgence of strong emotionalism, moral polarization schematization; extreme states of being situations; overt villainy, persecution of the good; clarification of the cosmic moral sense of everyday gestures" (p. 10). We can find melodramatic cues in any cultural production, although audiovisual language has optimal elements to depict them through its *mis-en-scène*. For example, as melodrama "relies on archetypal roles (e.g., the damsel in distress, the lover, the villain, the hero) to address moral polarization"

(Mujica & Bachmann, 2016, p. 336), close-up shots help to portray characters' struggle with good and evil, intensifying gestural exaggeration. Other resources, such as background music, slow-motion movements, and acting techniques akin to the theatre can also help melodrama representation.

In contrast, Mittell (2015) defines melodrama as "more of a mode than a genre, an approach to emotion, storytelling, and morality that cuts across numerous genres and media forms" (p. 233). Following Linda Williams's proposition to redefine melodrama away from certain excessive genres like soap operas, he presents melodrama as a mode that "unites various forms of serial television via a shared commitment to linking morality, emotional response, and narrative drive" (Mittell, 2015, p. 245). Building on that argument, Dorcé (2020) states that melodrama "would be the symbolic entity that makes it possible and enhances the audiences' affective involvement with characters and dramatic situations through a…scheme that is not necessarily reductionist, Manichean or excessive" (p. 11) and has become a dominant mode in global contemporary transmedia content.

Even though a melodramatic mode can be identified in structuring discourses in different formats (Dorcé, 2020), Latin American melodrama has some characteristics of its own, still leaning on some excessive traits and emotionally engaging with its audience. It was born within cinema but has found its fulfillment in *telenovelas*. This fictional TV genre originated in the Cuban radio drama and expanded throughout Latin America during the 60s, when broadcast television stretched across the continent. While some formal characteristics of this genre are close to English-speaking soap operas, featuring multi-casting love stories in many episodes, *telenovelas* have a whole different social impact on Latin American audiences, which appropriate this cultural product as it interacts with their own lives (Orozco, 2014). As in the rest of Latin America, this genre followed certain formal characteristics such as a high number of episodes, generally broadcasted daily, with a main love story and a happy ending. This Latin American version of a soap opera was "a cultural catalyst in which all types of desires and emotions effervescently converge, at the same time as an element of cohesion of that Latinity" (Orozco, 2002, p. 16). Thus, the success of this type of TV fiction allowed the development of a prolific industry, which generated enormous profits (Rincón, 2019; Santa Cruz Achurra, 2003). The stories depicted become part of everyday life, and audiences relate to the main characters through "catharsis, as per crying along with the heroine of a telenovela without feeling silly or guilty" (Orozco & Miller, 2016, p. 5). According to Martín-Barbero and Muñoz (1992), this connection between fictional content and audiences expands further on conversations within the community and has a cohesive effect, mainly by using melodramatic elements. These productions have successfully circulated internationally (Mazziotti, 1996; Piñon et al., 2020) and are well received by audiences in their adaptation to the new logic of streaming as super series, which "not only emulate their traditional telenovela narratives but also rework the genre" (Piñon, 2019, p. 204).

As genres evolve, they take elements from other storytelling traditions and aesthetic cues to work as transnational content. In today's audiovisual context, "new transnational production culture appears to be affecting the production, distribution, and reception of series, and crime drama seems to be a powerful, cross-cultural phenomenon with the noteworthy possibility of traveling internationally" (Hansen et al., 2018, p. 3), while remaining important for its local audiences. Within this genre, the emergence of the Scandinavian brand of Nordic noir has had an influence which "has turned into a transnational cultural form" (García-Mainar, 2020, p. 158). While Nordic noir can be identified with a broad number of cultural products, including literature and films, television production has expanded its popularity through iconic TV series like

Forbrydelsen (The Killing; DRI, 2007–2012) and *Bron-Broen* (The Bridge; SVT1, DR1, 2011–2015), which have been widely translated, subtitled, and adapted into foreign languages and markets (Stougaard-Nielsen, 2016). It is understood as a "broad umbrella term that describes a particular type of Scandinavian crime fiction, typified by its heady mixture of bleak naturalism, disconsolate locations, and morose detectives" (Creeber, 2015, p. 21). Nonetheless, McCulloch and Proctor (2023) theorize "Nordic Noir as a cultural category rather than a set of stylistic or formal characteristics" (p. 5), which is "built out of a familial matrix of intertextual ancestors and antecedents" (p. 9). In other words, it is a genre that can trace its origins to police procedural novels or French film noir and, as a cultural phenomenon, it is in constant evolution.

On the other hand, a combination of style, settings, and references to social concerns are perceived as attributes of this genre by the audiences and the industry. Waade (2017) identifies Nordic noir on screen "with a certain melancholy displayed in the plot, the imaginary and the characters" (p. 380) inherited from Scandinavian crime literature. These melancholic elements, she argues, have a strong connection "with a particular landscape and climate aesthetic that expressed romantic ideals" (Waade, 2017, p. 381) and can be characterized by:

> a) Complex characters and gender issues such as powerful women, feminized male antiheroes, and in some cases socially and emotionally dysfunctional main characters as well; b) A particular use of Nordic settings, including landscape, lighting, climate, design, and architecture; c) Societal criticism such as the Nordic welfare system. (Waade, 2017, p. 384)

Another important element in her characterization of melancholy is a particular kind of music expressing a certain gloomy mood in these crime stories: "The sound of Nordic Noir is often muted, at a slow pace, with single voices or no lyrics at all, sometimes involving significant dissonance and a mixture of instruments from folk music and more contemporary rock ballads" (Waade, 2017, p. 389).

The combination of narrative and aesthetic elements associated with Nordic noir, produced in one specific region of the world, has traveled extremely well (Badley et al., 2020). While it is not new that Nordic noir has influenced TV fictional crime dramas in many different places, even in sunnier areas such as Italy (Toft Hansen & Re, 2021) or Spain (Cascajosa Virino, 2018), we can wonder what happens with content in specific national contexts that are both small and peripheral. "The glocal nature of Netflix Originals…markedly local (in terms of such elements as the origin of the production, actors, locations, subject matter and language) and then globalized thanks to techniques and practices designed to reach audiences in other countries" (Neira et al., 2023, p. 3) impact national audiovisual production cultures and the way TV series look. This was theorized by Caldwell (1995) as televisuality, which designates a system of commercial conditions, styles, ideologies, cultural values, modes of production, programming, and audience practices that configure television as a medium. As SVOD companies are expanding norms of television production changing the way stories are told and how they look on screen in different parts of the world, we propose the following research questions:

> RQ1: What narrative and aesthetic elements can be identified in *42 Days of Darkness* as belonging to the Nordic noir genre?
>
> RQ2: In what way has Latin American melodrama become present in the series' televisual elements?
>
> RQ3: To what extent has SVOD production changed the Chilean fictional series' televisuality?

To answer these RQs, we propose a textual analysis of the six episodes of *42 Days of Darkness* (2022), focused on narrative and visual analysis (Casetti & Di Chio, 1999) of each episode. From a narrative point of view, we emphasized the description of plots, arguments, characters, and genre. The visual analysis focused on *mise-en-scène*, frames, visual elements, lighting, and sound motifs. For context, we include press interviews from Netflix regional executives, producers, and directors.

3. Latin American Melodrama Mode On

Although the series directors Claudia Huaiquimilla and Gaspar Antillo were keen on assuring they worked "on a story that is not based on, but is inspired by; therefore, it does not attempt to document an absolute truth" (Valdivia, 2022, para. 4), for those who followed the case through the press, the similarities with reality were evident. The main character, Verónica Montes (Aline Küppenheim), Viviana Haeger's alter ego who suffers the same fate, disappears from an exclusive gated community in a small city, leaving her documents, valuable objects, money, etc., behind. The rest of the cast is also made up of recognizable characteristics from police chronicles: Mario Medina (Daniel Alcaíno), the husband who will mobilize suspicion throughout the story; and the daughters, Karen (Julia Lübbert) and Emilia (Monserrat Lira), who grew up between the constant tension of the trial and the suspicions towards their father that never fully dissolved.

The narrative also includes some characters based on real people whose traits were enhanced by fiction to boost the melodramatic mode. For instance, one of the main characters is based on the victim's sister, Cecilia Montes (Claudia Di Girolamo), who embodies the tension between good and bad as she insists on finding out what happened to her sister and starts to point out her brother-in-law as a suspect, even though it might break the family. Her stubbornness to question the police work guides the storyline through the crucial stages of suffering and acting upon something that feels unjust. At the same time, Di Girolamo's worried face, in a close-up frame, is something the Chilean audience knows well, as the actress is one of the most recognizable stars from daytime *telenovelas* from the past decades.

Another fictional character that reaffirms the melodramatic mode of the script is the lawyer Víctor Pizarro (Pablo Macaya). Pizarro is a petty, decadent lawyer frequently suspended from court cases because he doesn't play by the rules. He becomes so obsessed with the case that he assembles a team of former investigative police officers who work as private investigators to solve the case: Nora Figueroa (Amparo Noguera) and Braulio Sánchez (Néstor Cantillana). This trio of misfits will discover inconsistencies in the husband's alibi and convince the victim's siblings to hire Pizarro as their lawyer. The figure of the lawyer in this series is the equivalent of the police/investigator, an emotionally complex character as seen in Nordic noir TV production, a melancholic observer with a particular sensitivity that captures loss and the unknown (Hansen & Waade, 2017). His traits can be identified as an anti-hero, an ambiguously moral protagonist (Eden et al., 2017) that reminds us of "the possibility of redemptive change and transcendence" (Fitch, 2005, p. 8). Like detectives Kurt Wallander and Sarah Lund, Víctor Pizarro is socially dysfunctional. He can barely work with the team of investigators he is supposed to trust; he has a problematic family life, as he is divorced and an unreliable father; he is awkward and does not care about his appearance. But most importantly, he is obsessed with his work and finding the true killer, whether to find justice for the victim or to satisfy his ego. In an interview with a local newspaper, Sergio Coronado, the real lawyer, said, "despite the great differences, there is something completely true: the passion with which he intervened in the case" (Mejías, 2022, para. 1). Pizarro's obsessive behavior shows up in a scene where he is supposed to go on a

fishing trip with his son. He suddenly realizes something doesn't add up in Medina's alibi and ditches his son in the middle of the road.

3.1. Contextualized Social Criticism: Chile's Social Inequalities and Gender Gaps

The context is quite important to develop the narrative of this series because the crime that inspired this fictional text is not just any murder case; in this sense, it brings to light some important issues in Latin American societies—gender violence against women and class differences when facing justice. Even though gender violence is a global problem and has become a key factor in transnational dramas, violence against women is a relatively common trope within Latin America's cultural production, and Chile is no exception. According to the annual report on femicide by the Chilean Ministry of Women and Gender Equality (Subsecretaría de Prevención del Delito et al., 2022), in 2020, there were 43 femicides and 180 attempted femicides. The largest number of completed femicides occurred in the Metropolitan Region (where the capital city is located), and "the regions with the most attempted femicides were the Metropolitan and La Araucanía regions (where the series was shot)" (Subsecretaría de Prevención del Delito et al., 2022, p. 17).

The concept of femicide, which means the killing of a woman or girl by a man on account of her gender, has given accountability to what a few years ago was just labeled as murder. The fact that the series was based on a criminal event of this nature pushed the production team to include a woman co-director in order to incorporate a gender perspective, which gave some specificity to the series. In a few interviews with the press, Claudia Huaiquimilla accentuates the intention of having this perspective: "The great challenge for me, who has written stories with male and adolescent protagonists, was to build a story where there are female protagonists of all ages, from all social classes…without being spectacular or falling into stereotypes" (Ramírez, 2022, para. 3). She reveals she read a lot of domestic violence and femicide cases to define the main traits of the female characters, showing special care for the way they would depict violence against women in this production. Indeed, we see a different approach to what national audiences were used to watching in other national TV series, where women are shown yelling or crying as they represent the victim's role. In *42 Days of Darkness*, there are no images of the crime or even flashbacks of violent episodes between Verónica and her husband. Images of the body or the crime scene are absent from the screenplay. In contrast, the victim appears in home-movie-style flashbacks, which portray her as a loving woman with her daughters and her sister, hugging and giggling by the lake in one of the few sunny scenes we see. Despite a certain gloominess in her eyes, the *pathos* of these scenes is more subtle than the content generally produced for local audiences.

Gender issues were not the only societal critique that became a fundamental stance for the directors. In addition, the script highlights the fact that the police searched for the body of a missing woman for days with no results, even though it was inside the house the whole time. Not only did they waste precious time in a murder investigation with their lack of thoroughness and diligence, but they didn't follow all the leads because of the class status of the victim's husband. The screenplay emphasizes the difference in treatment that both the police and the justice system give to individuals of different social backgrounds. While Nordic noir focuses its social criticism on the welfare system or other societal behaviors like a certain lack of social cohesion, in *42 Days of Darkness*, the theme of class appears throughout the storytelling. Class differences represented in this series are common to local audiences, as different social backgrounds and classism is an important trope in Latin American melodrama. Correspondingly, Chilean TV series have shown this topic less subtly, showing how different life can be in a dusty shanty town or an upper high-class quarter. In this

Netflix original, we don't see extreme poverty or evident power abuse from the upper class. Still, we see how detectives and judges treat Medina as he tries to influence the course of the investigation. For instance, there is a scene where police officers bring a dog specialized in locating corpses, and as the dog starts barking at the house, the victim's husband decides they should go to the woods instead. Police officers do not even question him when he points out where to search. According to Huaiquimilla, "This story acknowledges the existence of two Chiles…we come from two different backgrounds and this co-direction experience was a complementary dialogue that helped us a lot when it came to telling stories from different perspectives" (De la Maza, 2022).

3.2. Nordic Aesthetic With Local Markers

The true crime that inspired this series happened in Chile's Lake District during the southern hemisphere's winter. Hence, most of the news coverage from the case showed the rainy, cold, and humid weather of that part of the country during the harshest winter months. The landscape is full of lakes and forests that might resemble the Scandinavian scenery, which producers highlighted as an attractive element for international audiences. Therefore, the landscape is an important part of the storytelling, reflected in wide cinematic shots of the Llanquihue Lake and its leafy green surroundings. According to one of the series directors, the idea was "that the weather enhanced the feelings of the characters, the emotions…so the viewer would be able to see in the series that everything was bathed in the landscapes of the south" (Torres, 2022, para. 5). Consequently, it was purposely filmed during the winter to keep the atmosphere gloomy and foggy, enhancing the cool-toned lighting and a predominant blue filter that evokes the melancholic atmosphere associated with Nordic noir's contemplative cinematic landscape.

Lukinbeal (2005) poses the idea that cinematic landscapes "extend far behind the silver screen to intersect how we narrate our identities in our landscapes, and we define the extent of ourselves within a global cinematic community" (p. 18). He identifies landscapes as different concepts: in the first place, landscape is space "that is closely identified to the term placeless and generic representations of place" (p. 5), this space provides an area where the narrative can evolve, but it is reduced by close-up shots, which prioritize social space and dialogue. A second meaning of landscape on screen is as a spectacle, encoding "power relations within the gaze…what constitutes beauty, who is gazing and what we are gazing upon" (Lukinbeal, 2005, p. 11) We argue that the cinematic landscape serves in this series as an aestheticized spectacle of what has traditionally been just rural, harsh, and sometimes impoverished settings in Chilean audiovisual productions.

The district where the series was shot (the cities of Pucón, Villarica, and Puerto Montt) have beautiful touristy areas but are also situated in one of the poorest regions in the country, in constant tension for the right to ancestral land between the Mapuche people (Chile's Native people) and local farmers. Although the scenery might resemble the Scandinavian countryside, the material conditions are very different. This is what Lotz and Potter (2022) raise as the problem with streaming productions when the "need to attract and serve audiences across nations…actively discourages cultural specificity" (p. 688). According to the categories these authors established when describing how to locate a story in an audiovisual text, *42 Days of Darkness* would be a "placed" series. This means the series is geographically located in the narrative, and "background imagery of landmarks and well-known symbols locate the story so there can be no doubt as to where the action is taking place" (Lotz & Potter, 2022, p. 689). Yet, these signifiers provide minimal details to situate the story within its cultural context.

However, we still find some local markers included for local audiences to identify the story as Chilean. Images of recognizable national newspapers and TV channels are common as the crime had important press coverage. Another important local marker is the restaurant the lawyer and his two private investigators visit regularly. It is a typical *fuente de soda*, a diner where you can have a local hot dog with tea or a beer. The scenes in this place remind local audiences where these events are taking place. Furthermore, the sound works as a local marker, creating a distance with Nordic noir. While the main theme is a gloomy ballad with lyrics, called *Que Entre el Frío* (let in the cold) by the Chilean performer Niña Tormenta, the rest of the soundtrack mixes different musical genres, from Bolero to local pop music. The *mise-en-scène* is designed around dialogues between the characters and the music playing in car scenes, restaurants, shops, etc.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This article proposes to identify to what extent SVOD production can change Chilean fictional TV series televisuality. The case study analyzed here is Netflix's first original production in Chile, a small player compared with other Latin American countries like Mexico or Brazil.

Although some common elements of Nordic noir are recognizable at first glance, we can still find Latin American melodrama in *42 Days of Darkness*. Accordingly, the narrative of this series unfolds around three main ideas that are also present in this genre, including Chilean TV series produced without streamers: class differences, mistrust in governmental institutions, and oppressed but reliable female characters. Women are not always heard in an extremely patriarchal society like Chile, but local fictional content has a long tradition of portraying feminine characters as strong, determined, and guiding the actions in the story. In this case, the victim's oldest daughter, who is divided between believing her father's version or believing he is the murderer, embodies the emotional ambiguity of the case; the victim's sister is the one who pushes and hires a lawyer who is willing to go against all odds to find the killer; and finally, the policewoman who finds the body where everyone has looked before without seeing anything, are good examples.

Another point where the classic structure of Latin American melodrama is noticeable is the strong social structures that frame the characters' behaviors. There is certainly a melancholic trait in every single one of them, but they are not lonesome. The series preserves the classic representation of the importance of family ties, the same link that appears to be fundamental in *telenovelas* and other fictional Latin American TV series. Families constitute the foundational stone where every character can find support no matter what. The victim can rely on her siblings and mother to fight for the truth, and even the primal suspect can find unconditional support in family bonds.

At the same time, on an aesthetic level, Nordic noir was certainly an inspiration for how *42 Days of Darkness* would look, enhancing some elements that can be linked with the cinematic landscape of the Scandinavian region. Large frames of lakes and forests immerse us in the rainy atmosphere of southern Chile in winter. The cooled-toned lighting in the images might confuse a distracted audience, but the story is not set in Europe, but in South America. On a narrative level, the series also takes some topics we see in Nordic noir (and other complex TV series). The lead character depicts the figure of an anti-hero, this time not a detective but a lawyer obsessed with the case. He has all the classic features of an emotionally complex character: problematic relationships with his work, colleagues, and family; he is ambiguously moral and doesn't care what people think of him. The narrative also includes social criticism in Nordic noir, although this time centered around a critical point towards some institutions like the police or the justice system.

Despite the elements that might make us think that *42 Days of Darkness* is just another placeless crime series without any cultural context, some elements emerge and give a glimpse of a certain belonging within the Chilean TV fiction tradition. The way characters relate to each other, how they are framed, the problems they must deal with, and the sounds around them point to the cultural cues of local Latin American melodrama. This negotiated "glocal" content is another example of the emergence of novel subformats that combine local content "with the cinematic aesthetic motifs of the American and English multigenic series of Quality television" (Dorcé, 2020, p. 10). This change is now expanding to the smallest industries in the region.

The limitations of this work are mainly related to a certain opacity in the local industry, which makes it difficult to access real creative negotiations that happen when producing this kind of content. Although there has been some successful research where scholars have had access to production processes and even writing rooms (Redvall, 2013), the Chilean context is different. There is an official "total creative freedom" discourse that circulates in the press that might not be that accurate, and it is difficult to have a sincere response from local producers as they see the collaboration with SVOD as an opportunity to develop future projects. Another limitation of this analysis is that it is based on just one case. By now, Netflix and other SVOD companies have produced other series exploring different topics and are expanding to films and documentaries. This opens the possibility for new research on the next steps of streaming production in a small market like Chile and what challenges it will bring to Chile's audiovisual ecosystem.

Finally, local producers are delighted with the entrance of a new player in the industry, even if some creative concessions must be made to reach wider audiences as "the value Netflix claims to derive from culturally specific yet multi-nationally legible stories" (Wayne, 2023, p. 55) is high. Producer Ángela Poblete summarized the experience this way: "It is nice and satisfying to see our series travel, reach more people and break down myths, thus opening up spaces and paths for the consolidation of our industry" (CinemaChile, 2022, para 3).

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About the Author

Consuelo Ábalos is currently a PhD candidate in communication science at UC Chile. She has a BA in journalism and communication from Universidad de Chile and an MA in cinema and audiovisual studies from Université Lumière Lyon 2, France. Her thesis examines the relationship between public policies, production logic, and representation in Chilean TV series.

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Gen Z Sexual and Gender Fluidity in US Scripted Television

Traci B. Abbott

Department of English and Media Studies, Bentley University, USA

Correspondence: Traci B. Abbott (tabbott@bentley.edu)

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Abstract

This essay addresses the rise in sexual and gender-fluid characters in scripted US television targeting the Gen Z audience (born 1997–2012), based on their moniker as the "queerest" generation, with over 20% of younger US and international respondents identifying as LGBTQ in polls, the majority as sexually fluid (bi/pansexual) or non-binary (genderfluid/genderqueer). By analyzing six series (2019–2023) marketed as "authentically" Gen Z, I argue this shift invests in Gen Z's "hip" attitude towards such fluidity the same way Caldwell argues that 1990's diversification of the televisual audience produced a "programming agenda…that cultivates and rewards distinction in ethnic, racial, and class terms" (2020, p. 376). Caldwell's (2020) theory of boutique programming, described as "a selective, signature world where artistic sensitivity went hand in hand with social relevance and viewer discrimination" (p. 164), exposes how these recent series rely on "visual flourishes…and narrative embellishments" (p. 377) but move beyond cinematic techniques by combining palatial settings and extravagant lifestyles with shockingly explicit sexual situations. Caldwell's (2020, p. 377) assertion that "stardom and gossip defeat the dramatic obligation or need for narrative coherence" is reflected in the 21st century's reliance on social media promotions with hypersexual imagery and expensive designer outfits for its high school-age characters and an entertainment media which highlights their "edgy," "sexy," "explicit," and "provocative" content. Therefore, I argue that, like Caldwell, we should avoid "overestimat[ing] the political value" (2020, p. 376) of these presentations when these non-binary identities are shown as inaccessible, depoliticized, and hypersexualized, which maintains rather than challenges entrenched binary ideals of gender and sexuality.

Keywords

American television; bisexuality; gender non-binary; Gen Z; LGBTQ; television; televisuality; teen series

1. Introduction

This article addresses the rise in sexual and gender fluidity in scripted television targeting the Gen Z audience (born 1997–2012) as a continuation of Caldwell's theory of boutique programming, described as "a selective, signature world where artistic sensitivity went hand in hand with social relevance and viewer discrimination" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 164). Currently, Gen Z is identified as the "queerest" generation in international polls (Ipsos, 2024) with the majority more likely to use a fluid category like pansexual and non-binary than traditional binary labels (lesbian/gay or trans male/female). I analyze six drama/dramedies produced on three streaming channels and marketed as "authentically" Gen Z (Collider Staff, 2023; Hadadi, 2021; Sarner, 2021; St. James, 2019). These television shows are notable for their diverse queer ensembles in American high schools, but using elements of televisuality, I argue they are still problematic because their televisual qualities depoliticize gender and sexual fluidity by sensationalizing its transgressiveness or presenting its normalization as dependent on its elite social and economic setting to avoid threatening the privilege of the heterosexual and cisgender majority.

1.1. Generational Shifts, Queerness, and Moral Panic

This study began when, as a queer media scholar, I sought to reconcile two concurrent but seemingly contradictory shifts in American culture. First, Gen Zers in American and international polls gained attention for identifying as the queerest generation ever, 22%, more than twice their Millennial (born 1981–1996) counterparts and four times the rate for their parents' generation, Gen X (born 1965–1980), with non-cisgender identities at 3%, triple the Millennial rate and six times higher than Gen X (Ipsos, 2024; Jones, 2024). Those who identify as gender or sexually fluid make up the majority of each group (Ipsos, 2023; Jones, 2023, 2024) and represent 76% of all gender non-binary adults in the US or 912,000 Americans (Wilson & Meyer, 2021). A greater number have LGBTQ friends, which is perhaps why the majority of Gen Zers, including those who identify as cisgender and heterosexual, expect diverse storytelling and casting in scripted television and film (Deloitte Insights, 2024; Fowler, 2023; GLAAD, 2024; Ipsos, 2023, 2024). As this age-group primarily consumes streaming products, SVODs (subscription video-on-demand apps) Amazon Prime, Netflix, Max, Disney+, and Hulu have generated teen-focused programming with primary LGBTQ characters in a variety of scripted genres, particularly starting in the late 2010s/early 2020s (Deloitte Insights, 2024). These genres include horror (*Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, Netflix, 2018–2020; *The Order*, Netflix, 2019–2020), musicals (*Julie and The Phantoms*, Netflix, 2020; *High School Musical: The Musical—The Series*, Disney +, 2019–2023), mystery (*The Wilds*, Amazon, 2020–2022; *Pretty Little Liars: Original Sin*, Max, 2022–2024), superheroes (*The Runaways*, Hulu, 2017–2019; *Hawkeye*, Disney+, 2021), and comedy-dramas (*Never Have I Ever*, Netflix, 2020–2023; *Love, Victor*, Hulu, 2020–2023).

The second shift was also recognizable to these Gen Zers, since more than half fear the increasingly vitriolic backlash against LGBTQ rights, particularly in US politics (Migdon, 2022). Current political discourse has reinvigorated a 20th-century moral panic that characterizes the LGBTQ community as a threat to children and adolescents (Johnson, 2004; Lancaster, 2011). State legislation, however, often targets LGBTQ youth directly, to prevent legal changes in gender, ban medically necessary transition procedures (American Psychological Association, 2021), eliminate protection from discrimination in schools, and bar education on LGBTQ issues in the classroom (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.; Movement Advancement Project, 2023). The hostility evident in 2023's 500+ state bills imperils this already vulnerable population (Savin-Williams,

2021; Vincent, 2020), with a similar trend in anti-LGBTQ legislation in a number of European countries, while even more chart a disturbing rise in anti-LGBTQ violence (Forest, 2024; Guillot & Coi, 2024).

2. Literature Review: Queer and Trans Characters on Teen Television

Queer theorists have embraced an oppositional framework with heteronormative citizenry (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Edelman, 2004), arguing, "the queer movement challenges the very ideas of normality which underpin social institutions and practices….Binary oppositions are replaced by a proliferation of differences which queer theory and politics refuses to hierarchize" (Weedon, 1999, p. 73). Duggan problematizes this assumption with "homonormativity," which affirms the homo/heterosexual binary through a "politics that does not contest heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them" (Duggan, 2003, p. 50). Trans scholars parallel this concept with "trans normativity," which regulates normative gender roles for cisgender and transgender people alike (Beauchamp, 2019; Fischer, 2019). As binary definitions, homonormativity and trans normativity erase the sexual (bi/pansexuality) and gender (non-binary) fluid majority present in both communities (Diamond, 2008; Hayfield, 2020).

Queer media theorists validate how younger viewers seek affirmation through queer characters (Griffin, 2017; Padva, 2020), a crucial stage in positive identity development (Bond & Miller, 2017; Dajches & Barbati, 2024). Recent teen series are applauded for racially diverse representations and feminist storylines, including for lesbian and trans female characters (Marghitu, 2021; Masanet et al., 2022; Pérez & Valdivia, 2023; Schumacher, 2024). Yet media scholarship primarily addresses fluid identities only within the broader LGBTQ group (e.g., Gitzen, 2024; Jane, 2022). Similarly, bisexual media scholarship tends to focus on adults (e.g., Del Castillo, 2015; Millsap-Spears, 2021), as does analysis of homo/transnormative representations (e.g., Branfman, 2019; Francis, 2021). Those who affirm queer teen characters overlook the relevance of fluid versus binary identities as well as how they uphold homo/transnormativity, as seen in *Love, Victor* (Hulu, 2020–2022), *The Wilds* (Amazon, 2020–2022), and *Never Have I Ever* (Netflix, 2020–2023), recent series otherwise notable for their racially diverse cast and culturally-authentic storylines. Homonormativity has therefore tampered "the queer edge" which previously allowed television producers "to draw newer, hipper, younger audiences in the hyperdiversified landscape of popular forms" (L. Henderson, 2013, p. 61). Those SVODs intent on capturing Gen Z's attention with transgressive sexual content, "the go-to marker of distinctive television trying to push boundaries and tap into contemporary cultural discourses about gender and sexuality" (Macintosh, 2022, p. 24), have moved beyond the binary into sexually and gender fluid identities typified by multipartner triangulated attraction, sexual relationships, and sexual acts.

3. Methodology

My larger book project started with a purposive sampling of US-produced SVOD scripted non-animated television series aired during or after 2018 referenced as "teen" series using IMDB keywords and plot reviews of series:

> Centered around adolescent characters with a focus on cultural milestones and rites of passages…finding the right romantic partner, rebelling against or conforming to adults rules, choosing a career path, coming to terms with one's parents, and establishing a secure identity. (Marghitu, 2021, pp. 3–4)

Relying on a combination of advocacy reports (GLAAD's annual *Where We Are on TV*), popular blogs like Wikipedia (e.g., "List of Dramatic Series with LGBT Characters: 2020"), and LezWatchTV, I eliminated series without LGBTQ primary or multi-season recurring characters and those which were set in pre-2015 time periods (e.g., *Paper Girls*, Amazon, 2022; *Stranger Things*, Netflix, 2016–2022). As a result, my findings may not be representative of all teen-focused programming between 2018–2023, but the resulting series covered enough variations by genre and SVOD that I believe it still offers a representative synopsis of how teen series manage LGBTQ representations for Gen Z audiences.

Prior to and during a full-time research sabbatical, I performed a systematic qualitative content analysis to identify and interpret how the remaining 25+ series represent LGBTQ characters within the series cast ensemble (how many primary characters are identified as LGBTQ?; within this category, how many are referenced or revealed to be binary identities and how many are fluid identities?), the visual representation of the LGBTQ characters (how are LGBTQ characters portrayed in costume and mannerisms that appears typical or atypical of their stated gender identities, or does the LGBTQ character continue common LGBTQ stereotypes?), and the textual representation of the LGBTQ characters (how does their character's sexual and gender identity first appear or is mentioned?; how do character arcs related to sexual and romantic maturation appear the same or differently for LGBTQ characters?; how does the series position similar sexual and romantic experiences, including first love, virginity loss, and rejection, the same or differently for LGBTQ characters?). My interpretation of the findings was informed by patterns identified by queer and trans-media scholarship on current scripted television and film (see Caprioglio, 2021; Edwards, 2020; Francis, 2021; Horvat, 2020; Oppliger, 2022) and feedback from scholars at various conference presentations of my findings. These patterns are now the basis of a work-in-progress book monograph, excerpted here to offer a more limited analysis supported by Caldwell's televisuality theory.

This essay presents representative content of six American scripted teen-focused dramas/dramedies from 97 episodes on three streaming channels, ranging from the deliberately "edgy" Max to the more mainstream Peacock. Marketed as "authentically" Gen Z (Collider Staff, 2023; Hadadi, 2021; Sarner, 2021; St. James, 2019), each series includes multiple LGBTQ main characters in their ensemble casts, yet fluid characters are positioned as the most transgressive with storylines which conflate fluidity with sexual avarice and the inability to procure stable romantic relationships. While neither multipartner sex nor polyamory is transgressive by definition (Gleason, 2023; Schippers, 2016), such characters exemplify how "the conflation of bisexuality and nonmonogamy in the popular imagination…[creates] stereotypes of bisexuals as immature or sexually voracious" (Willey, 2016, p. 9). This promiscuity, in turn, disrupts the relationships of homo- and heteronormative peers through storylines familiar to melodramatic teen narratives (love triangles, crushes on inappropriate adult partners, secret romances) and those pulled from more adult content (multipartner sex, polyamory, sexual fetishes). Moreover, a paratextual analysis of each series' promotional material and social media accounts underscores how the SVODs balance queer niche-casting to the Gen Z audience with transgressive queer-baiting.

4. Caldwell's Televisuality in the Age of Streaming and Homonormativity

Caldwell's (2020) televisuality theory interrogates "the relationship between intellectual surplus and televisual embellishment" (p. 378) when cable "narrowcasting" (p. 368) unleashed a range of "boutique" programming intent on producing "a selective, signature world where artistic sensitivity [goes] hand in hand

with social relevance and viewer discrimination" (p. 164). Caldwell's delineation of how cinematic innovation filtered into the television landscape has been applied most often to "high-end television" (e.g., Sexton & Lees, 2021; Wheatley, 2016), but his explication of stylistic excess identifies an "abundance" evident in a variety of visual and narrative qualities characteristic of recent teen series: the "emotional and stylistic excess" of its melodramatic focus on teen angst (Mittell, 2015, p. 245); the "vicarious social-sexual experience" of teen sexual exploration (Williams, 2008, p. 7); and the constant repositioning of "maturity [and] edginess" in characterizing contemporary teen sexual relations (Schumacher, 2024, p. 360). The usefulness of his analysis to my approach, however, centers on the aforementioned "intellectual surplus" that he identified as a key component to reach the diversified post-network television audience, resulting in a "programming agenda…that cultivates and rewards distinction in ethnic, racial, and class terms" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 376).

In my view, Caldwell's (2020, p. 165) televisuality theory explains why the "sensitive relevance" of the sexual and gender fluidity represented by these Gen Z characters hardly denotes a progressive liberal ideology even though fluidity, by definition, disrupts the traditional binaries between male/female and hetero/homosexual that maintain hetero-, homo- and cisnormativity. Caldwell insists that intellectual surplus in ground-breaking series like *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990–1995) was designed to reach working professionals with "degrees in the liberal arts and humanities" in order to both reward its niche audience's sense of progressive superiority *and* avoid "alienat[ing] *other* viewers" presumably those less progressive and well-educated (Caldwell, 2020, pp. 366, 367, emphasis added). The same self-congratulatory emptiness of this distinctiveness propelled the concurrent 1990s rise in US prime-time representations of "white, affluent, trend-setting" gay men and lesbians "targeted at liberal television viewers, both straight and gay, who may feel that by watching [such] 'sophisticated programs'…they are somehow supporting the struggle for gay rights" (Becker, 1998, pp. 43–44). In the 2020s competitive streaming landscape, these programs rely on its Gen Z audience to appreciate its "distinctive" and "hip" attitudes towards gender and sexual fluidity while homonormative presentations of monosexual and gender-conforming queer teens who are "cute…sweet [and] likeable" assures more conservative or older viewers that gender and sexual binaries remain intact (Dhaenens & De Smet, 2024, p. 13).

While this analysis does not foreclose the possibility that LGBTQ+ Gen Zers value such representations (Gitzen, 2024; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021), I rely on Caldwell's (2020, p. 378) entire equation, "the relationship between intellectual surplus and televisual embellishment," to define the "embellished" elements which simultaneously highlight the series' "queer edge" and then distance its edginess as either inaccessible or inconsequential. To maintain this focus on the continued relevance of Caldwell's analysis, I categorized the elements using his definitions of: (a) "visual flourishes—special effects, graphics, acute cinematography, and editing—and narrative embellishments" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 377); (b) "stardom and gossip [which] defeat the dramatic obligation or need for narrative coherence" (p. 377); (c) and the faux realism of their "highly conscious alternative worlds" (p. 377). My analysis attests to the ongoing applicability of Caldwell's theory to explain why televisual embellishment still saturates US television in the age of streaming without threatening hetero/cisnormativity and the dominance of binary identities.

4.1. Visual Flourishes and Narrative Embellishments

Like "queer edginess," televisual spectacle is a shifting marker of innovative style showcasing decades of digital technological advancements. At its best, its union with narrative connects "fictive emotions…to the

diegesis, reinforcing the sense for the viewer of being present in the fictional world" (Sexton & Lees, 2021, p. 39). The "fictional world" in teen series, however, is based on the viewers' familiarity with, if not also a direct experience of, the American high school, a milieu obsessed with status where interpersonal conflicts play out often simultaneously in the public world of classrooms, sporting events, and parties, and the private teen-only online world. The mystery series, *One of Us Is Lying* (Peacock, 2021–2022, two seasons, 16 episodes), capitalizes on this duality over two seasons which investigate who killed the manipulative outcast Simon (season one) or the bullying jock Jake (season two). Showrunner Erica Saleh integrates numerous narrative embellishments to convey the immediacy of social media posts that encourage suspicion for the title's referenced group, a mixture of familiar teen tropes like the defiant bad boy, the popular cheerleader, and the studious virgin. For example, as popular queen bee Vanessa livestreams accusations against the group (S2E1), the rapid edits shift between her in the hallway and her on the app surrounded by viewers' affirming responses (Figure 1). While Saleh pulls plotlines from Karen M. McManus's novel, she heightens the sexual dynamics by making Maeve bisexual and Janae gender non-conforming. Maeve, a tangential member of the group who functions as a foil for older sister Bronwyn, has a rebellious nature that is integral to her sexuality. One of the series many flashbacks reveals that Maeve sent Simon sexually explicit photos (S1E5), but the next episode (S1E6) explains Simon was instigating a romantic rivalry with Janae, his sidekick in sowing adolescent drama through an anonymous gossip site. Each episode relies on this barrage of information from flashbacks to fuel online indictments which consistently question the primary characters' motivations, but for Maeve, these center on her fluctuating erotic desire. Janae, an introverted loner whose gender identity is revealed in season two (E3), is suspicious of Maeve's stated interest, telling her, "you're transferring your feelings for Simon onto me....It's incestuous and weird" (S2E2), which Maeve agrees is "fucked up." Thus, Saleh's narrative embellishment of Maeve and Janae's identities seems construed to frame Maeve's attraction to Janae as a "pathological mimicry" of her failed heterosexual coupling with Simon (San Filippo, 2018, p. 184).

Euphoria (Max, 2019–2022, two seasons, 18 episodes) garnered attention immediately as "the most unflinching, not to mention explicit, take on modern adolescence ever to hit US television," but visual spectacle is inherent to creator Sam Levinson's exposé of current teen "challenges" which deliberately bait "totally f---g freaked out" parents (Sandberg, 2019). Its young cast has an impressive diversity of sexual fluidity across the gender spectrum with male (Nate, Elliot), female (Jules), and gender non-binary (Rue) characters, although none are labeled as such with any specificity. Levinson's cinematographic flourishes document Rue's drug addiction through entertaining musical hallucinations (S2E4, S2E7), but more often explicate the interior sexual desires of its teen characters. Two episodes——Jules' ecstasy trip at a club

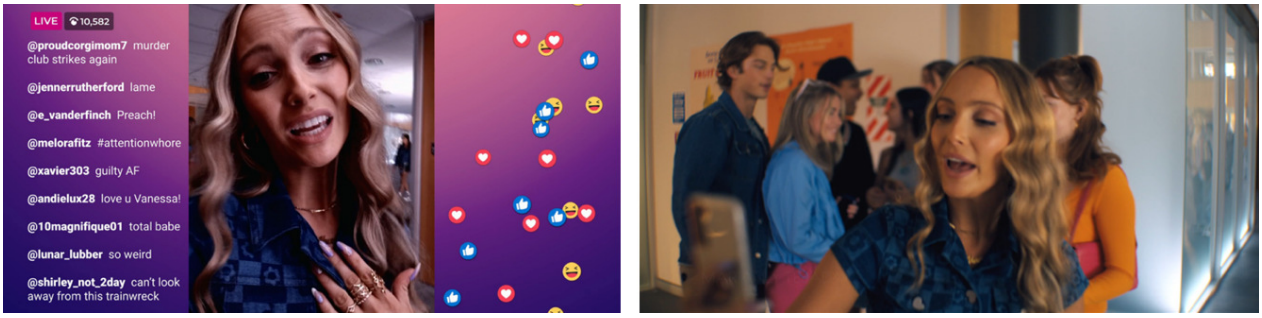

Figure 1. Vanessa livestreams accusations against the group in *One of Us Is Lying*. Source: Oxenburg and Weaver (2022).

(S1E7) and Nate's nightmare (S2E7)—offer sexually explicit depictions of each's fluid attraction. Using diffuse lighting and shifting point-of-view shots, Jules' and Nate's sexual partners are transposed and interchanged. Jules shifts between her actual sexual partner (Anna), her future sexual partner (Rue), and her sexual crush (Nate), with whom she shared an intense but brief and online-only sexual relationship documented, like Saleh's series, by positioning shots of their sexually charged texts and pics against their mundane daily activities (S1E4). Jules' hallucination reaches an orgasmic conclusion, but Nate's dream, which incorporates Jules, ex-girlfriend Maddy, and current girlfriend Cassie, ends with him being penetrated by his own father, Cal, in a recreation of Cal's sexual liaison with trans feminine Jules in season one facilitated by an anonymous hookup app for gay men (S1E1). Despite this difference in tone, the visual flourishes in these scenes, meant to signify their conflicted emotional and sexual interiority, also situate Jules and Nate as so sexually avarice that one partner cannot satisfy them, a stereotypical conflation of bisexuality with "erotic perversion, nymphomania, or sex addiction…[defined as] orgasms receiving preference over gender-of-object choice" (San Filippo, 2018, p. 185). This assessment is demonstrated by other episodes where each has impulsive sex with a new partner—Cassie for Nate (S2E3), Elliot for Jules (S2E4)—that creates more dramatic love triangles.

Another disturbing visualization (S2E2) of Nate's unstable sexual desires occurs after Nate is hospitalized with a head injury. When he starts hallucinating about having sex with Cassie, the scene revels in their attractive nude physiques but eventually devolves into a disturbing flashback from earlier in the episode, switching his adolescent self with teen Nate as he masturbates to his father's taped escapades with male and female partners, including other trans women. Levinson thus reduces each man's attraction to Jules to a stereotypical sexual fetish (Goehring, 2022). Rue's drug-induced hallucination during sex with Jules (S2E4) is more romantic, with a stylized visual montage of them as famous lovers, including the leads in *Ghost* (1990), *Titanic* (1997), and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005; Figure 2). The shift between male and female characters may reinforce Rue's "non-binary" gender and expression (Handore, 2022; Whittick, 2019) but again undermines Jules' female identity with this visual masculinization. It is therefore relevant that despite the series' self-conscious elucidation of teen sexual habits narrated by Rue, including choking (S1E1), violent fantasies (S2E2), and a "dick pic" lecture (S1E3), the "perversity" of Jules' sexual fluidity is repeatedly referenced through her attraction to cis men (Nate and Cal) who fetishize her trans body as well as her unstable relationships with sexually fluid drug addicts (Rue and Elliot).

Genera+ion (Max, 2021, one season, 16 episodes) may have been canceled after one season but is notable for its sexually-fluid Gen Z creator, Zelda Barnz, and the show co-runner, her father Daniel Barnz, a film

Figure 2. Rue and Jules as Jack and Ennis from *Brokeback Mountain*. Source: Levinson (2022).

writer/director. Although many characters avoid labeling their sexual identities, the cast covers a generous portion of the LGBTQ spectrum, from lesbians Greta and Luz to gender-normative, sexually fluid boys J and Nathan and girl Riley, gender fluid queer Chester, and gay Bo, along with two gay dads of straight Arianna, and Greta's trans feminine guardian aunt. But the Barnzs set up sexually and gender-fluid characters as the most prone to self-sabotage and unstable romantic relationships from the first episodes with stylistic flourishes. Spatial cross-matches of underwater plunges with similar lighting symbolize emotional angst for Riley (E1) and Nathan (E3, Figure 3), with Riley's leap into Nathan's pool foreshadowing Nathan's jump into the harbor after his drunken confession of bisexuality to his shocked family during his sister's wedding rehearsal. The spectacle of Chester's genderqueer attire in the first episode repeats from multiple character perspectives, each time following his progression through the schoolyard to a stare-down with the vice principal in deliberate defiance of the dress code (E1). Shown repeatedly in Grindr hookups with adult men, Chester shares his fears of dating Bo with Riley, who agrees, "I would not even know how to go on a real non-hookup date" (E10). Even though gay guidance counselor Sam supports Chester (E1), his libido ruins their relationship by anonymously sexting Sam on Grindr (E5), while Nathan manipulates Chester into a fake relationship to agitate his parents, logically imperiling Chester's new romance with Bo (E5). The Barnzs complicate narrative arcs further by opening episodes with flashforward scenes intended to obfuscate first which teen is giving birth in a mall bathroom and then who is the father. Indeed, J's bisexuality, articulated in episode four, serves primarily as a false flag to hide his parenting before it is revealed in episode five. Even though the Barnzs do not incorporate as many stylistic embellishments as Levinson, those integrated repeatedly question the emotional and sexual maturity of the plurisexual or gender-diverse characters.

Like Levinson, Guadagnino documents adolescent hedonism with cinematographic enhancement in his mini-series, *We Are Who We Are* (Max, 2020, one season, 8 episodes). The series privileges the perspective of two younger teens, sexually fluid Fraser and his new friend, gender fluid Harper, on a US military base in Italy. Accolades for Guadagnino's queer romance, *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), led reviewers to assess the series' sex scenes and male nudity (E1, E4) with nonchalance (e.g., Brooke, 2020; Buchanan, 2020). Multiple episodes, though, integrate stylistic choices similar to these other Max series in order to conflate hedonistic drug and alcohol use with sexual exploration and teen emotional instability for these main characters. The first (E4) brings together the series' entire teen cast for a wedding celebration of one teen's older brother prior to his deployment. When Guadagnino segues from a frenetic daytime dance party to dimly lit, partially-nude couples, Harper and Fraser remain spectators to reiterate their sexual immaturity, particularly when Harper's heterosexual teenage brother has a prominent threesome with two Italian girls.

Figure 3. Riley (E1, left) and Nathan's (E3, right) pool scenes. Source: Barnz and Barnz (2021a, left), and Barnz and Barnz (2021b, right).

The second occurs when Fraser surprises Jonathan at his apartment (E7). Like Chester's crush on his guidance counselor or Jules' rough sex with Nate's father, Jonathan is another inappropriate adult choice for the teen character, as he works for Fraser's mother Sarah, the base commander, as a major in the US Army. Earlier episodes (E5, E6) document Fraser's heightened sexual yearning for Jonathan with closeups of his longing looks and intimate touches, so the erotic sensuality Guadagnino adds with soft lighting, wide shots of Jonathan and girlfriend Marta's almost nude bodies, and diegetic music as Fraser is wooed by the two's slow dancing and caresses suggests that it is Fraser's immaturity, not Jonathan and Marta's inability to seduce a 14-year-old boy, that derails their sexual encounter. Symbolic sounds of the downpour and thunder combined with dim lighting accentuate Fraser's emotional breakdown in the street after he runs out of their apartment in shame.

Both of the main characters, then, end the series as sexually frustrated and confused as to where they started. In the last episode (E8), Guadagnino similarly uses cinematic techniques to render the emotionally fraught state of gender-fluid Harper (E8), including disconnected jump cuts as they dejectedly walk through the base after learning of their family's imminent departure. The unexpected transfer forces them to leave Fraser, the only person who affirms their fluid gender identity. A more jarring special effect occurs later in the episode after Harper rejects an older woman's sexual advances backstage at a concert they attend with Fraser. The camera rotates 180 degrees as Harper flees back to the crowded club floor. In this way, Guadagnino graphically suggests that Harper's gender identity has altered their world into a state of unreality that is inconsistent with the real world where they must return as "Caitlin." This reading aligns with Guadagnino's refusal to specify "whether Caitlin [sic] is trans or just exploring," although he is the director and co-writer (Sepinwall, 2020). He instead discounts "Caitlin's" gender as an age-appropriate "process of self-discovery" (Sepinwall, 2020), as if their identity is yet another representation of bacchanalian adolescent excess.

4.2. Stardom and Gossip in Place of Narrative Coherence

By rebooting *Gossip Girl* (The CW, 2006–2012; Max, 2021–2023, two seasons, 24 episodes), Joshua Safran showcases "stardom and gossip" intertextually, replicating a plot centered on an anonymous social media account, referenced in the title, which creates havoc within a New York City private school, a setting each version uses to promote characters' fashion to audiences (Marghitu, 2021). Fashion media then specifies pieces for viewer consumption, like $950 Balenciaga sneakers (Parker, 2021), but even during the series' hiatus speculates "what the characters of the 'Gossip Girl' reboot would wear this fall" (Ilchi, 2021). Ryan Murphy's *The Politician* (Netflix, 2019–2020, two seasons, 15 episodes) is set in a comparatively affluent southern California private school, and his previous pairing of teen fashion with star gossip in series like *Glee* (Fox, 2009–2015) and *Scream Queens* (Fox, 2015–2016) lead to articles promoting *The Politician* as "the most stylish show on Netflix" (Petter, 2019), with links, for example, to a character's $4,000 Chanel backpack (Wasilak, 2019). Both series reflect a pattern foundational to the *Gossip Girl* original of presenting the on- and offline machinations of these super wealthy teens within scenarios the press then promotes as "gloriously implausible—and uncomfortably plausible" (Marghitu, 2021, p. 127).

These series' sexually explicit situations generate so much gossip they seem constructed to shock rather than titillate. The standard set in *Euphoria*'s opening episode when teenage Jules has anonymous sex with Nate's middle-aged father (S1E1) was eclipsed by a locker room scene in season two, which led the press (e.g., Chambers, 2019) to gleefully count the visible genitalia moving in and out of the camera frame focused on an impassive Nate (S1E2). Coverage similarly highlights "one of the more shocking and wildest scenes of

season 2" (Lambe, 2022), a "super homoerotic" (Shafer, 2022) locker room dance number during a school play written by a classmate to expose Nate's sexual fluidity to his peers (S2E7). Levinson's infatuation with a multiplicity of penises (Chaney, 2019) may be why *Genera+ion*'s locker room scene (S1E3) with male nudity a few years later in 2021 garnered little notice, despite Chester and an unnamed teammate discussing fellatio. These scenes pander to press attention but more disturbingly hypersexualize the motivations of these sexually or gender-fluid teen boys, which occurs again when *Genera+ion* aired a single "dick pic" numerous times to reveal Nathan's tryst with his female twin's boyfriend (E2, E3), although deemed "cringeworthy" (Fowle, 2021) rather than erotic.

Nate's and Chester's sexual avarice, however, is overshadowed by the hedonistic escapades of Max, the sexually fluid teen boy in *Gossip Girl*. Max's pansexuality is introduced (S1E1) in a public tryst with a male and female peer in a scene deemed "soft porn" by at least one previewer (Nathan, 2021), then recurs in a four-way sexual romp in season two with classmates Victor, Valeria, and Rex (S2E2). Safran includes a Levinson-esque cinematographic flourish in the season's finale (S1E12), when Max languishes in post-orgy boredom as the camera pans up through a jumble of male and female nudity and entwined limbs. These numerous extended nude scenes continue into season two (S2E1) once Max enters into a polyamorous relationship with an established power couple, bisexual Aki and heterosexual Audrey, after both start lusting after him. Press varies on whether to praise (Belle, 2021) or castigate (Glassman-Hughes, 2023) their polyamory, but the LGBTQ press raved, "*Gossip Girl* is back, and gayer than ever before!" (T. Henderson, 2021). Showrunner Safran did insist the polyamory was part of the reboot's intention "to showcase a more diverse universe…to tell more queer stories" (Aurthur, 2021), but press instead conflated Max's hedonistic nature with his sexuality by addressing him as a "pansexual bad boy" (Sarner, 2021), "pansexual lothario" (McMenamin, 2022), and "pansexual heartthrob" (Setoodeh, 2021). Meanwhile, interviews with the actor playing Max, Thomas Doherty, who identifies as neither polyamorous nor queer, focused so much on Max's sexual fluidity and the triad that Doherty was left recounting repeatedly that he found the experience "liberating" (Gonzales, 2021; Setoodeh, 2021) and "educational" (Setoodeh, 2021; Singh, 2022). Like Fraser and Chester, Max has an inappropriate relationship with teacher Rafa (S1E4), while these multipartner sexual trysts hypersexualize both pansexuality and polyamorous relationships (Schippers, 2016; Scoats & Campbell, 2022). Safran's finale (S2E8), like Guadagnino's, more egregiously frames fluidity as immature self-indulgence. A drunk Max appears only briefly being thrown out of a bar, while the now hetero dyad of Aki and Audrey vacation in Italy (S2E10), their happiness mirrored by the cast's other heterosexual couples.

Like Safran and Guadagnino, Murphy's reputation as a gay marquee producer-creator generates press for all his ventures. Prior to the premiere, Murphy and frequent co-creators Falchuck and Brennan released a poster campaign with one captioned, "we promise you bi partisanship" (Dela Paz, 2019), soon followed by reviews proclaiming, "practically everybody on this show is queer" (St. James, 2019). An overview of season one's press against season two's plot, however, provides a striking example of how Murphy's and lead Ben Platt's gay "stardom" defeat *The Politician*'s "narrative coherence." Like this poster, Platt's interviews reference the overlapping love triangles between Platt's character, Payton, his best friend, River, and their respective girlfriends Alice and Astrid to claim, "no one is free from the queerness, really, on the show" (Guglielmi, 2019) and "everyone is somewhere on the [sexuality] spectrum" (Malkin, 2019). Yet a past threesome with Astrid, River, and Payton, teased as the cause for River's suicide (S1E1), is never shown in season one. When it finally airs in a flashback (S2E1), Payton and Astrid deny any sexual motivation two years later. Payton assures Astrid the "threesome" was unconsummated ("no penetration at all") because,

"I wasn't attracted to River in that way….I knew he wasn't gay,…[or] bisexual," to which Astrid affirms, "I knew he wasn't gay," despite earlier claiming she and River were "fluid" (S1E1). The press's investment in boosting Murphy's "world where everyone's 'a little bit queer' " (Duffy, 2019) explains why season two publicity did not expose the contradiction. Season two further erases Payton's season one sexual fluidity through a throuple with Astrid and Alice, as male–female–female relationships confirm "the male-dominant idea that 'having' many women signifies [heterosexual] status and power" (Schippers, 2016, p. 23).

Social media promotion also highlights threesomes, polyamory, and love triangles as a means to capture its Gen Z audience, even in those series, *One of Us is Lying* and *Genera+ion*, which do not air as many sexually explicit sex scenes to capture press attention. An Instagram post of Maeve first with Simon and then Janae is captioned, "the love triangle no one saw coming" (One of Us is Lying, 2022). *Genera+ion* takes Arianna's comment about her two dads, "they're thinking of bringing a third into their relationship" (S1E2), out of context, as a black and white caption posted with "couples are so 2020. It's all about throuples now" (Genera+ion, 2021a), perhaps to foreshadow a desexualized throuple between heterosexual female friends Delilah and Naomi and their shared male crush, Cooper (S1E12, E15). Two Instagram posts promote the throuple episode, the first captioned, "why be a couple when you can be a throuple?" (Genera+ion, 2021b) and a second proclaiming, "ngl [not gonna lie] dating with your best friend looks kinda fun" (Genera+ion, 2021c). Neither hints at its actual purpose as a school dance date solution, not sexual or relationship exploration, which predictably falls apart when Cooper chooses monogamy with one of the girls. Negative reviews of the series which argue it lacks depth (Juzwiak, 2021) and "doesn't seek a real point of view beyond its capacity to say risqué things" (Lawson, 2021) accentuate how such social media clickbait supersedes the "need for narrative coherence." Like the poster promoting River and Payton as romantically involved, *The Politician*'s Instagram published a shot of them kissing (S1E1; The Politician, 2019a), while another uses a still of the two as hearts explode behind them (Figure 4; The Politician, 2019b). The plot discontinuity is correctly summarized by a Gen Z reviewer: "season one was praised for a story where it seemed that 'everybody's bi,' but in season two, the writers seem to be arguing that nobody is *really* bi" (Nichols, 2020).

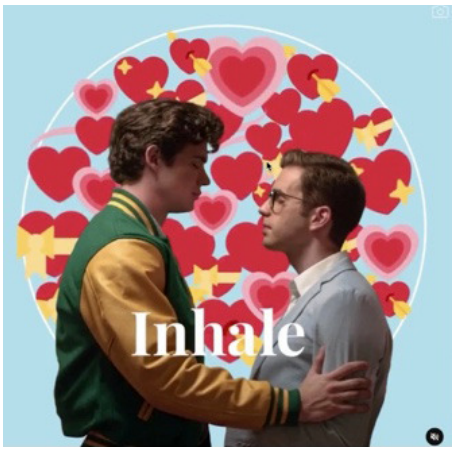

Figure 4. River and Payton in a Season 1 Instagram promotion image. Source: The Politician (2019b).

Unlike the press which lambastes these series for promoting "soft porn" (Nathan, 2021) and "wildly exaggerated [teen] sex" (Naftulin, 2019), my concerns are not prudish but focus on the creators' hype of fluid sexual identities and behavior. Even prior to the pandemic, rates of sexual experience for US teenagers

have greatly decreased (United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022), a trend denigrated as an "aversion to sex" (Soh, 2021) and "failure to launch" (Fry, 2023). Thus, these series play into stereotypical generational presumptions about youth "gone wild" with sensationalist plotlines, sexually objectified 20-something actors playing high school students, and social media posts hyping narrative twists as sexually transgressive.

4.3. Faux Realistic Settings That Are Actually Highly Conscious Alternative Worlds

Five of these series are set in wealthy enclaves in southern California or New York City (Peterson-Withorn, 2023), faux "realistic settings" of progressive utopias where one-percenters ostentatiously showcase not only their haute couture, but also their mansions, yachts, and household servants. Tellingly, both regions are repeatedly castigated in conservative US media for their liberal politics (Kleefield, 2022; Media Matters Staff, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Guadagnino's series supports these assumptions, despite being set in Italy on a fictional American Army base. Reactions to Fraser's dyed hair and street fashion are attributed to the family's last posting in New York City, and Harper's father later blames this "fashion victim from New York" for his "daughter's" masculinization (S1E1, E6). Even if *The Politician* is a satire demonstrating "the absurd lengths the rich will go to stay on top" (Sandberg, 2019), Murphy's actors bely its satirical tone in interviews where they laud how their "vulnerable" queer characters (Cobb, 2019) "inspire young viewers to accept their authentic selves" (Guglielmi, 2019). As Himberg contends about *The Politician*, these series frame fluid queerness as "contained within class margins…to the 1 percent," so unattainable to most American viewers (Himberg, 2022, pp. 126–127). The parallel sexual hijinks by parents, whether Arianna's gay dads "exploring a third" (*Genera+ion*, S1E2), lesbian Monet's mom and dad's affair with the same woman (*Gossip Girl*, S2E4), Payton's mother Georgina's male and female lovers (*The Politician*, S1E6, S2E1, S2E4), and the revealed affair between Fraser's lesbian mom Maggie and Harper's conservative mother Jenny (*We Are Who We Are*, S1E7), attests to the setting's sexual liberality as elemental.

As queer utopias, homo/bi/transphobia, when present, is interpersonal and thus easily resolved, a strategy which, as queer media scholars insist (e.g., McLean, 2023; Peters, 2018), avoids confronting hetero/cisnormative systemic inequality. After Aki fearfully comes out to his powerful father, he publicizes his son's identity to refute a gay employee's lawsuit (S1E6), and neither Max's dads nor Audrey's divorced parents bat an eye over their polyamory (S1E6, S2E2, S2E7). Janae's singular declaration of their non-binary identity and romance with Maeve on *One of Us Is Lying* causes no friction at home or school, only their participation in "Simon Says" stunts (S2E4). Maeve similarly never frets about her sexual fluidity or relationship even as her heterosexual older sister agonizes over telling their conservative parents about her "bad boy" boyfriend (S2E7). Chester's genderqueer outfits lead to dress code reprimands (S1E1), but his supportive grandmother raises no concerns (S1E11). His hypermasculine water polo teammates solicit his opinions on fellatio (S1E3) and later cheer him up by twerking until he joins in (S1E8). I would like to believe in a world where parental and peer acceptance, genderqueer expression, and sexually fluid sexual histories are *de rigueur* for all LGBTQ+ teenagers, but pretending it is already so obfuscates uncomfortable realities, including how more than half of US LGBTQ youth experience parental rejection and unsafe school environments (Human Rights Campaign, 2023) and how political debates inflame already high rates of anxiety and depression for queer teens (The Trevor Project, 2023). Including sexual and gender-fluid characters only to have televisual elements discount or dismiss them should not become the standard for teen television creators to engage Gen Z viewers without challenging entrenched binary ideals.

5. Conclusions

My argument demonstrates that Caldwell's analysis of "televisual exhibitionism" or "self-conscious…stylistic individuation" aimed at "niche audiences who are flattered by claims of difference and distinction" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 360) in the 1990s holds true in 2020s America. My framework based on Caldwell's key components of televisuality demonstrates that each series' combination of wealthy fashionable teens, showrunners crowned bad boy "provocateurs" (Buchanan, 2020; McHenry, 2021) with "boundary-pushing" sexual explicitness (Sandberg, 2019), and settings in bastions of US leftist ideology "cultivate and reward" viewers with "specific socioeconomic and political commitments" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 376) without requiring any reflection or action during the increasingly anti-LGBTQ political climate. As I have suggested, Caldwell's theory identifies "how programs…tie acute stylistic looks to alternative narrative worlds" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 84), now aspirational queer utopias whose "*look* is oppositional, but its *attitude*…is mainstream" (p. 307). Caldwell's theory of televisuality continues to be a useful lens to document how seemingly progressive television storylines and diverse casting maintain a programming agenda to capture niche audiences without threatening the dominance of the cisgender, monosexual men currently in charge.

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About the Author

Traci B. Abbott is an associate professor in the Department of English and Media Studies and the Gender & Sexuality Studies minor coordinator at Bentley University, Waltham, MA, USA. She published *The History of Transgender Representation in American Television and Film Genres* in 2022 and in various journals, including *Women's Studies*, *International Journal of Communication*, and *The Journal of American Culture*. Her article in *The Journal of Popular Culture* won the Russel B. Nye Award for Outstanding Article in 2023.

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ARTICLE

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Romanian Televisuality in the Post-Broadcast Era: Visual Signature of Popular News TV Talk Shows

Andreea Alina Mogoș and Constantin Trofin

Department of Journalism and Digital Media, Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania

Correspondence: Andreea Alina Mogoș (andreea.mogos@ubbcluj.ro)

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Abstract

The current Romanian television landscape presents an unusual abundance of 24-hour news channels that emerged in the 2000s. As these media still play a central role in the public sphere, the media logics (technologies, formats, genres, norms) followed by prominent Romanian news TV channels need to be discussed in relation to the growing influence of digital and social media because, in this hybrid media system, power is exercised by those who are able to create information flows "across and between a range of older and newer media settings" (Chadwick, 2013, p. 207). The current study aims to analyse how traditional news media logics are merging with new televisual practices by thoroughly examining how television formats and visual conventions have changed under the influence of digital technologies, social media, and the Covid-19 pandemic. The textual analysis of prime-time talk show programmes broadcast by the most popular Romanian news TV channels (România TV, Antena 3 CNN, Digi24, Realitatea Plus) focuses on news talk shows and their respective translation into audiovisual language (mise-en-scène, image, sound, image–text relation). The findings support prior research, emphasising that news programmes employ both visual and textual codes and conventions within specific formats to construct a credible representation of reality. These programmes feature a fragmented visual signature centred on authoritative figures such as academics, analysts, and political leaders, which serves to reinforce the credibility of the news content.

Keywords

multi-screen display; post-broadcast; televisuality; TV news programmes; visual construction; visual setup

1. Introduction

In Romania, television remains an important source of news (62%), after online sources (66%), with five 24-hour news channels among the top 18 TV and radio brands used weekly or more than three days a week

(Newman et al., 2024, p. 101). As these media continue to be heavily used by adult audiences (Eurobarometer, 2023) to make sense of the world, this article proposes a discussion on how and whether traditional news media and new methods of producing news TV shows are converging. It examines current TV formats and visual conventions, which are heavily influenced by digital technologies, social media, and the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis of prime-time news talk shows on Romania's most popular TV news channels (România TV, Antena 3 CNN, Digi24, Realitatea Plus) examines how news talk shows relate to genre-specific forms and styles and how these are translated into televisual language.

2. (Re)Defining Televisuality

The emergence and rapid evolution of electronic media technologies significantly changed the way audiences engage with and interpret media content. Television quickly became, and remained for decades, one of the most culturally influential media. From the perspective of audience–channel interaction, television has been categorised as a cool medium, offering limited engagement with substantive stimuli and thus requiring more active participation from viewers, including the simultaneous perception and understanding of visuals and sounds (McLuhan, 1994). However, audience engagement is not only determined by the medium itself but also by its content and how it is used in specific situations and contexts (McQuail, 2005).

Televisual content is characterised by distinct features, conventions, and structures—its aesthetic and narrative qualities prioritise real-time interaction, immediacy, and emotional engagement with the audience, crafting a unique storytelling approach forged during the Golden Age of American television (Deming & Tudor, 2020). Therefore, any analytic approach to televisuality should take into consideration that visually enforced narratives are not independently established because these aesthetic features emerge as responses to technical, ideological, or cultural limitations (Thorburn, 2004). Describing televisuality as a synthesis of stylistic, technological, and ideological elements, Deming (2005, p. 126) reveals the concept's resistance to being fixed in time or in relation to other media. Caldwell (2020) also notes the changes in the television industry during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, which have visibly reshaped the aesthetic and stylistic forms of televisuality towards an increased emphasis on visual style and spectacularization, and greater experimentation with visual style and narrative complexity. This age of televisuality is translated into complex lighting schemes, camera movements, and high production values.

In the late 1990s, rapid digitisation further transformed the landscape and the dynamics of televisual content production, transmission, and reception, marking a shift in reproducibility and interactivity (Chadwick, 2013; Hilmes, 2008). The growing competition from social media has later affected the professional practices of both public and commercial broadcasters, compelling them to balance their editorial integrity with commercial content influenced by social media algorithms and advertising strategies (García-Perdomo, 2021; Van Dijck & Poell, 2015). The concept of hypertelevision (Scolari, 2009) refers to these new television formats, marked by heightened interactivity, narrative complexity, and viewer engagement, which mirror the dynamics of digital platforms.

At the beginning of the 2020s, the Covid-19 pandemic prompted television journalism to explore novel forms of visual storytelling due to the restrictions imposed by the unprecedented health crisis. In the context of the proliferation of press releases and press conferences, accompanied by a decline in genuine reporting, live coverage has been prioritised due to the inherent constraints of the production process (Saptorini et al.,

2022). As Vobič (2024) remarks, the pandemic not only altered the logistics of news production but also impacted the aesthetics and visual presentation of television journalism. Traditional televisual aesthetics, typically characterised by polished, professionally produced visuals, were disrupted as reporting shifted to home settings, Zoom/Skype interviews, and user-generated content. A new form of authenticity in television news emerged, aligning its visual presentation with the broader social and cultural disruptions caused by the global health crisis.

In the post-broadcast era, television companies have increasingly turned to multiplatform practices, such as transmedia (Jenkins, 2014) and intermedia (Scolari, 2009) storytelling, to increase the compatibility of their products across media markets: While these practices "expand opportunities for artistic expression, they also challenge established genres and aesthetic features of broadcast television" (Keinonen, 2016, p. 66). The emergence of aesthetics and formats associated with smaller screens (Dawson, 2007) has also resulted in a shift towards the youthification of television (Krauß & Stock, 2021), as the industry seeks to engage with younger audiences through strategies related to production, representation, aesthetics, and distribution.

Therefore, this article considers televisuality a dynamic and multifaceted concept, subject to constant evolution in response to economic, technological, and ideological pressures. At the same time, it acknowledges that the aesthetic strategies of televisuality are not neutral, as they carry ideological implications concerning the role of television in society and its relationship with its audience.

3. Deconstructing Televisual Texts

Gradually, television became a site of negotiation, where questions of authority, identity, and meaning are played out through an increasingly visualised form because television genres and formats integrate a combination of social practices, meanings, and texts emerging from social, cultural, and professional spheres (Mittel, 2004). Television genres and their narrative conventions shape both the production and reception of television content (Lury, 2005), and they are reappropriated and adapted by the television industry of each country (Chicharro Merayo, 2011).

More specifically, form and style in television shape audience understanding: While various aesthetic techniques (such as editing, camera work, lighting, and sound design) contribute to the overall meaning of the content, the formal aspects of television help to set the tone, create mood, and guide viewer interpretation (Creeber, 2006).

Understanding the role of genre and narrative provides insight into the larger cultural, social, and ideological functions of television as a medium that mirrors the social anxieties, political discourse, and ideological debates of their time (Creeber, 2023). It is, therefore, pertinent to deconstruct intricate televisual content, bearing in mind that "meanings are constructed by the program text through plays of image and sound" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 112).

The semiotic approach to televisual content seeks to identify the various types of signs that convey meaning within the medium (Bignell, 2002, as cited in Bignell & Woods, 2022). This approach sees the language of television as a combination of visual and aural signs, including images, graphics, speech, sound, and music. The theoretical framework proposed by Bignell and Woods (2022, p. 38) suggests that television programmes

should be studied as texts, with televisual objects regarded as a network of meaningful signs that can be analysed and interpreted. The objective of the textual analysis is to deconstruct the meanings embedded in the televisual texts by analysing the image and the sound and the relationship between these two components.

Therefore, by treating televisual content as a network of signs and symbols, it becomes possible to deconstruct and interpret the meanings encoded in the interplay of image and sound. This approach highlights the complexity of television as a cultural artefact, where the meaning of a text is not entirely predetermined by the creators but is also negotiated through a dynamic relationship between the text and its audience.

4. Style and Form in the TV News Programmes

Different types of television programmes appeal to their audiences in different ways, reflecting the interests and social meanings associated with programmes of a particular genre. Television genres refer to the categories of television programmes (such as news, documentaries, reality TV, soap operas, and dramas) that share common characteristics in terms of narrative structure, visual style, themes, and audience expectations. Over time, the boundaries between different genres have dissolved as part of the process of hybridisation (Bignell et al., 2017). For example, televisual techniques typically employed in fictional dramas were adopted by news programmes to emphasise emotional intensity and suspense.

A better understanding of the current televisual genres implies, among other categories, the analysis of the stylistic and formal elements associated with the news programmes, which reflect the choices made by the production team in the use of mise-en-scène (lighting, camera position and camera work, setting), sound, image, and editing.

Mise-en-scène is a complex concept that refers to "the contents of the frame and how they are organised" (Gibbs & Gibbs, 2002, p. 5). Particular elements of the mise-en-scène contribute to the meaning-making process: Lighting can shape the understanding of a sequence, direct the viewer's attention, or bring a certain tone; the camera image (type of shot, camera angle and movement, shot-reverse-shot) can organise the space and action within the frame; sound can direct the viewer's attention, smooth the joins of the storytelling, or signal that viewers should pay attention. Editing, whether it happens in post-production or live, relies on conventions in order to produce a coherent sense of space and time for the viewer, such as the 180-degree rule, a convention that the cameras are positioned only on one side of an imaginary line drawn to connect two performers in a scene, can produce a coherent sense of space for the viewer (Bignell & Woods, 2022, pp. 53–57). Additional elements that underlie the connotation of the sounds and voices used in television are an apparent acoustic source of speech (diegetic/non-diegetic), the gender and the accent of the voice, the relative volume of the voice, the speed of the speech, and the timbre and tone of the voice. Also, titles shape and convey the programme's meaning (Bednarek, 2014), fulfilling diverse functions: to signal the beginning of a programme and/or to separate elements or scenes, to identify or name a television programme, to attract or "grab" viewers, to establish a particular emotional mood, or to create a particular aesthetics. Studying the actual language in television is very productive because televisual characterisation is significantly shaped by the expressive language (intonation, word choice, syntax, and discourse patterns) used by characters, which in turn influences how viewers perceive and relate to them (Bednarek, 2011).

5. Research Design

5.1. Sample

This study focuses on four prime-time news talk shows produced by the top four competitors in the news television market (Bunea, 2024; Kantar Media Audiences, 2024). All talk shows air simultaneously. The respective TV stations, ranked in the order of rating numbers, are România TV, Antena 3 CNN, Digi24, and Realitatea Plus. The current analysis considers the news talk shows broadcast from January 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024. Since these news channels do not provide access to the complete archives, the analysis considered the publicly available recordings. Therefore, the official YouTube channels of the TV stations or talk shows (Romania TV, Sinteza Zilei cu Mihai Gadea, Digi24HD, Realitatea.NET) were used to access the audiovisual content. For the 18-month period covered by the study, the sampled TV stations had different publishing policies for their recordings: The data describe popular Romanian news talk shows along with their airtimes and the number of publicly available recordings—*Punctul Culminant* (România TV) airs from 9 PM to 11 PM (n_{RTV} = 361); *Sinteza Zilei cu Mihai Gâdea* (Antena 3 CNN) runs from 9 PM to 11:30 PM (n_{A3} = 685); *Jurnalul de Seară* (Digi24) broadcasts from 8 PM to 11 PM (n_{Digi} = 536); *Culisele Statului Paralel* (Realitatea Plus) airs from 9 PM to 12 AM (n_{RPlus} = 100). The YouTube channel Realitatea.NET ceased publishing recordings of the analysed news talk show two years ago. Instead, the latest episodes are now uploaded on the website https://www.realitatea.net/emisiuni/culiselestatuluiparalel, where each episode is divided into three separate segments for viewing.

5.2. Research Questions

This study aims to address the following key questions:

RQ1: Which are the most prominent televisual features of the sampled prime-time news talk shows?

RQ2: What are the main differences in terms of visuality in the sampled prime-time news talk shows?

RQ3: Which post-broadcast influences can be identified in the analysed visual texts?

5.3. Methods

The current analysis draws on a theoretical framework that proposes studying television programmes as texts, where "televisual objects are considered a network of meaningful signs that can be analysed and interpreted" (Bignell & Woods, 2022, p. 38). Since both denotation—the content we see—and connotation—the meaning behind that content—are associated with televisual content, the analytic perspective should combine intersemiotic and multimodal dimensions (Caple et al., 2020).

The analytic approach proposed by Barrett (2020) identifies four dimensions of image criticism: description of the visual content; interpretation of the meanings, symbolism, and narrative conveyed by the image; evaluation based on artistic and technical qualities; and theorisation—connecting the image to broader theories or cultural contexts. The relationship between description and interpretation is intricate, but ideally, interpretations emerge from descriptive details (Schroeder, 2006, p. 303).

To detect the multilayered structure of televisual content, the current study employs close analysis, which enables a deeper understanding of each element's function within a scene and highlights the specificities of visual products, "to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension" (Boyles, 2012). The aim of close analysis is to detect aesthetic, ideological, and strategic choices made by the visual content creator (Barrett, 2020). To achieve this goal, the textual analysis of televisual content focuses on the style and form of shots and scenes to explore how news talk shows are structured. Researchers reviewed all available recordings or live broadcasts within the sampled timeframe, identifying patterns and recurring structures, which were categorised into key dimensions and indicators that define the program's meaning, including mise-en-scène (lighting, camera positioning, camera movement, and setting), sound, imagery, and editing. Table 1 outlines the analysis grid used to identify the visual signature of each analysed talk show.

However, a potential limitation of this method is that close analysis might be influenced by the reader's background and theoretical approach, which can shape interpretation. This could be mitigated by re-reading, where analytical tools are applied to form informed interpretations and to recognise both specific details and the broader cultural significance of the text (Ohrvik, 2024).

Table 1. Analysis grid used to identify the visual signature of the sampled talk shows.

Category	Indicator
1. Mise-en-scène	
Location	TV studio (permanent set)
Setting	Décor arrangement Spatial arrangement
Host of the talk show	Costume Non-verbal language Verbal language
Host–guest relationships	Hosts' position relative to guests Verbal interaction (tone, manner)
Axes of the action	Visual coherence of interaction (compliance to the 180-degree rule, separation, and continuity)
Lighting setup	Three-point lighting vs. wash of light High-key lighting vs. low-key lighting Light treatment of background
Camera work	Multi-camera production Types of shots (close-up, medium close-up, medium shot, long shot, master shots) Camera movement (static vs. dynamic)
On-screen use of colors	Colour palette
2. Sound management	Sound directing Diegetic vs. non diegetic
3. Structure/editing	Live directing of studio cameras, live feeds, or pre-recorded materials
4. Textual & verbal production	
Titles	Visual (colour/contrast) Content Emotionality
Syntagms	Written or spoken sentences within a televisual context

6. Results

6.1. News TV Channels Profile

România TV is a 24-hour Romanian news television channel with a conservative and nationalist orientation. It was launched on October 23, 2011, by Sebastian Ghiță, a former entrepreneur and politician. The channel's slogan is "We give the exact news!" In 2023, the channel ranked fourth in national ratings, secured the top position in the news TV segment, and achieved an average rating of 1.3% with a market share of 6.8% (Bunea, 2024). The demographic profile of the prime-time audience reveals that 57.4% of this cohort is comprised of individuals aged 65 and above. The proportion of viewers who have completed higher education is 20.4%, the lowest figure observed among news television channels. The proportion of female viewers is 51.6% (Barbu, 2019a). The entire talk show is structured around an apocalyptic narrative. The content of broadcast news is designed to evoke a sense of imminent catastrophe, thereby generating feelings of concern and anxiety among the audience, which in turn translates into high ratings (Bunea, 2024). All subjects are addressed in a sensationalist manner. One of the distinctive language features of this media outlet is the coining of new terms with pejorative intent, particularly aimed at those who differ in opinion. The most notable of these is *reziști*, a term derived from the Rezist movement, which was initiated by protesters against political interference in the judicial system. This term is now used to describe any individual who supports progressive, pro-vaccine, and pro-EU policies. The show under consideration for this study is *Punctul Culminant* (The Climax) with Victor Ciutacu.

Antena 3 CNN is one of the longest-standing news channels in Romania. The channel is currently affiliated with CNN. In 2023, the news TV channel was rated fifth in national ratings (second in the news TV segment), with an average rating of 0.9% and a market share of 5% (Bunea, 2024). The prime-time audience is comprised of 49% individuals aged 65 and above, 32.9% between the ages of 55 and 64, and the highest concentration within the news TV segment. The majority of Antena 3 CNN viewers (93.1%) are over the age of 45. Approximately one-third (29.4%) of the viewers have obtained a higher education qualification (Barbu, 2019b). The talk show under consideration for this study is entitled *Sinteza Zilei cu Mihai Gâdea* (The Day in Summary with Mihai Gâdea). Reporters situated in remote locations are a common feature of the programme. The contributions of this element are both content and dynamic-related. They are sometimes live and sometimes pre-recorded. The reporters consistently demonstrate proficient camera work, maintaining composure and a professional demeanour. The structure of the show is straightforward and coherent.

Digi24 is a 24-hour news television channel that started broadcasting on March 1, 2012, when it was launched by Digi TV ("Televiziunea de ştiri Digi 24 a primit licenţă," 2012). In 2023, the channel was ranked ninth in national ratings, with an average rating of 0.4% and a market share of 1.9% (Bunea, 2024). The show selected for analysis is *Jurnalul de Seară* (Evening News) with Cosmin Prelipceanu. The structure of the show is consistent with that of other similar productions. The technical quality of the video and audio is a further positive aspect.

Realitatea Plus represents the inaugural news channel in Romania, having been established in 2001. The channel has experienced a complex history, yet it has served as a springboard for the careers of prominent Romanian television journalists and politicians. In 2023, the channel was ranked 10th in national ratings, with an average rating of 0.4% and a market share of 1.9%. This was slightly lower than that of

Digi24 (Bunea, 2024). The prime-time audience is comprised of 46.2% individuals aged 65 and above, with 24.6% falling within the 55–64 age bracket. Approximately 84.7% of Realitatea Plus viewers are over the age of 45. Approximately one-third (29.4%) of the viewers have completed higher education (Barbu, 2019c). The talk show selected for analysis is *Culisele Statului Paralel* (Deep State Backstage) with Anca Alexandrescu.

6.2. Visual Production Elements

6.2.1. Set Design and Studio Space

6.2.1.1. România TV

In terms of mise-en-scène, the programme is set in a studio that is seldom depicted in a master shot, most frequently not even once throughout the entire broadcast (Figure 1a). The visual scheme of the programme and the channel itself is notable for its striking use of strong colour contrasts. The setting is rather congested, with all participants seated at the same table, facing the cameras. The studio setting displays a backdrop of large LCD screens displaying a continuous loop of computer generated video in a predominantly red/pink hue, accompanied by simple panels in the same colour scheme. This creates a sense of continuous concern and weariness. Everybody has a sombre demeanour, and the guests are handpicked to sustain this mindset. There is no observable movement on the set. All participants are positioned at the same table, thereby leaving no space for any movement on the set. The participants' gestures and facial expressions are consistently grave, suggesting that they expect the worst is yet to come.

6.2.1.2. Antena 3 CNN

The programme is presented in a live studio setting with a multi-camera configuration. The set is arguably the most aesthetically pleasing and well-designed in the market. The set is contemporary, spacious, minimalistic, versatile, and practical. The floor is rectangular, with dimensions corresponding to the 16:9 aspect ratio. This configuration enables a master shot to encompass the entirety of the set. This facilitates orientation on the screen and the construction of clear axes of communication (Figure 1b). The background consists of LCD continuous video walls, as opposed to the fractioned screens displayed in the România TV set. The dark, reflective surface of the floor contributes to the overall impression of a clean, shiny, modern, and distinctly urban aesthetic. There are no big tables on the set. The host and guests are positioned to face each other and are seated on chairs, thus allowing for the accommodation of varying numbers of guests, from one to four or even more. This layout also facilitates the camera work. The black floor and background, completed with the touches of a coloured light contour on the floor and ceiling (with RGB capability), contribute to the impression of an elegant night show. The set design allows for a natural and unimpeded movement. The spatial configuration of the set facilitates communication between the host and each guest, as well as between guests. It is relatively simple for cameras to comply with the 180-degree rule, which provides the viewer with a satisfactory sense of on-screen orientation.

6.2.1.3. Digi24

The mise-en-scène of the programme is that of a live studio show with a multi-camera setup. The set is recent (2024), and the new look was the subject of intense promotion prior to its launch. However, any

visible improvements are difficult to discern. The only notable alteration is the flooring, which has been transformed into a video screen displaying a continuous loop of footage portraying an urban landscape at night from an elevated perspective (Figure 1c). The set is relatively contemporary in design, yet its overall appearance is fairly conventional. The walls and floor are equipped with video screens. The background is constituted of LCD video walls with a variety of display options. Positioned centrally within the set is a circular table whose plinth incorporates a prominent screen displaying the programme's name. Typically, all participants are seated around the table (Figure 1c). In certain instances, the table may be removed, thereby creating space for alternative floor plans, such as the election night special edition (Figure 1d). The host and guests are positioned facing each other on chairs; however, the round table restricts the number of guests and limits the possibility of obtaining clean single shots of each participant, with hands frequently visible in the frame. Utilising chairs with wheels on any television set is not the best option, given their considerable size and conspicuousness.

6.2.1.4. Realitatea Plus

The programme is presented in a live studio setting with a multi-camera configuration. In terms of production, Realitatea Plus and România TV exhibit considerable similarity. The single set used for all the station's productions is a notable example of this. The set is circular in shape and features three prominent segments of a large, fragmented, ring-shaped white table. The set features a prominent circular logo positioned centrally on the floor. A multicoloured background is created using LCD screens mounted at varying heights on fixed panels (Figure 1e).

The participants are seated on high chairs positioned behind the illuminated tables. In this congested, radiant, and substantial visual milieu, participants are easily eclipsed. The background calls for low-key lighting, yet the bright tables make it challenging to adequately illuminate the participants. It is notable that the master shot of the studio is rarely, if ever, shown, except on the rarest of occasions. Occasionally, a portion of the studio is utilised for demonstrations, wherein a participant endeavours to substantiate a claim by inscribing notes on a whiteboard or flipchart (Figure 1f).

6.2.2. Lighting and Camera Work

6.2.2.1. România TV

The set is illuminated by a continuous wash of light, suggesting the presence of a single line of key lights. All individuals present on the set are illuminated by a uniform, unchanging, and uninterrupted light source, which comes from every direction. The production utilises a multi-camera setup, which is capable of delivering at least six individual single medium shots. Wider shots are absent (Figure 1a).

6.2.2.2. Antena 3 CNN

The set allows for a multitude of individual and group shots, as well as camera movements, thus conferring a high degree of visual variety and dynamism. The programme commences with a monologue delivered by the host, which is presented in a variety of shot sizes, including full shot, medium-full shot, medium close-up, and close-up. During the opening sequence, the cameras entirely focus on the host. The setup allows for limited

Figure 1. Visual setup and lighting: (a) *Punctul Culminant* visual setup (Romania TV, 2024); (b) *Sinteza Zilei* visual setup and lighting (Antena 3 CNN, 2024); (c) *Jurnalul de Seară* visual setup and lighting (Digi24HD, 2024a); (d) *Jurnalul de Seară* alternative visual setup (Digi24HD, 2024c); (e) *Culisele Statului Paralel* visual setup and lighting (Realitatea.NET, 2023); (f) *Culisele Statului Paralel* alternative visual setup (Liviu Dragnea, 2024).

yet welcome camera movement, including slight push-ins or pull-outs, as well as trucking shots. The quality of the camera work and the effectiveness of the live direction, both in terms of video and audio, contribute to the overall impression of a lively and well-balanced production (Figure 1b). The spatial relationships and coherence of the dialogues are evident and well-controlled.

6.2.2.3. Digi24

In order to illuminate the *Jurnalul de Seară*'s aforementioned setup, it is necessary to utilise a flat lighting solution, such as a wash of light. The intelligibility of the content is satisfactory, although the lighting is quite flat. The entire set is illuminated with a high-key light source, which gives the appearance of being quite artificial. The programme does not employ a significant number of reporters based in the field. Instead of live coverage, pre-recorded packages are utilised. The set allows for limited single and group shots, and very limited camera movements, which seldom occur. Basic shots that are commonly used include master shots

and sometimes high-angle shots (Figure 1c) because the circular display blocks the view in case of more than two guests. It is obvious that there is no possibility of showing the entire set in one wide shot. Single shots of guests are used extensively (Figure 2a). Medium close-ups or close-ups of participants in dialogue can create a better axis of action, using shots and reverse shots. Live feeds are treated the same way. The multiple-windows display is sometimes in total disrespect of any spatial orientation on the screen. But, as mentioned earlier, it is impossible to comply with the 180-degree rule in the case of circular seating and multiple single shots display (Figure 2b). It is challenging for cameras to adhere to the 180-degree rule, particularly when utilising a multi-screen display.

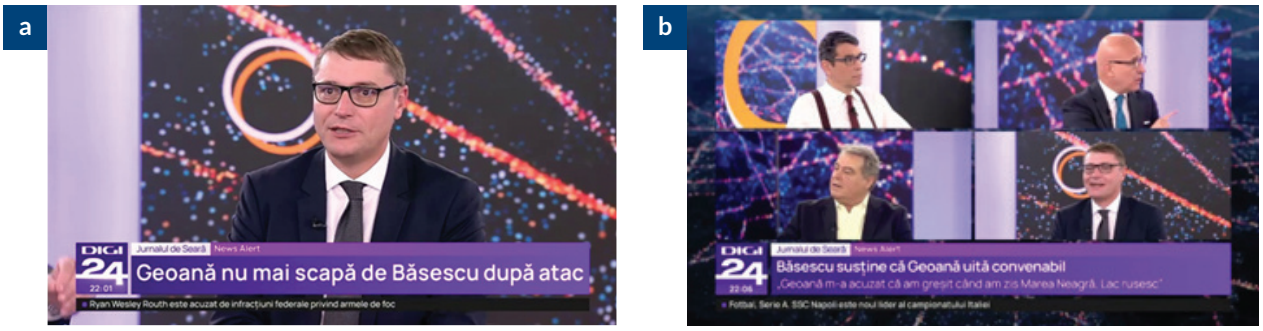

Figure 2. Camera work in *Jurnalul de Seară*, Digi 24: (a) single medium shot (Digi24HD, 2024a); (b) multiple single shots (Digi24HD, 2024a).

6.2.2.4. Realitatea Plus

The spatial configuration of the set facilitates communication between the host and each guest, as well as between guests. The cameras are easily able to comply with the 180-degree rule, which provides the viewer with a good sense of orientation. This is evident despite the fact that, for the majority of the programme, only a single multi-camera screen is in use. Nevertheless, in certain special editions, the spatial arrangement, while visually accurate, fails to adhere to the standards of journalism. Despite the potential for a multitude of individual and group shots, as well as camera movements, these are rarely employed due to the configuration, colours, and reflective properties of the materials (Figure 1e).

6.2.3. Multi-Screen Displays

6.2.3.1. România TV

All participants are displayed continuously in individual windows, rendering it impossible to determine the orientation on the screen (Figure 3a). Additionally, a window is displayed, teasing the subsequent topic in a manner that is either ambiguous or insidious. The structure of the programme is relatively straightforward. The split screen image is displayed for the majority of the duration of the programme, with slight variations occurring intermittently. Upon the introduction of the reporter's live feed, the reporter is initially displayed within their own window. It is evident that one of the guests has been excluded in order to accommodate the reporter's window. At this time, all guests are silent (Figure 3b). Subsequently, the reporter is displayed in full screen (Figure 3c).

Figure 3. Camera work in *Punctul Culminant*, România TV: (a) multiple individual studio windows (Romania TV, 2024); (b) multiple individual windows with reporter (Romania TV, 2024); (c) single shot of reporter on location (Romania TV, 2024).

6.2.3.2. Antena 3 CNN

The multi-screen display, a common practice among news outlets, is employed by Antena 3 CNN as well (Figure 4a). In addition to this, several windows display different illustration videos, which present a wealth of information from diverse angles on the same story. However, this can also induce stress or overwhelm the viewer (Figure 4b).

Figure 4. Multi-screen display in *Sinteza Zilei cu Mihai Gâdea*, Antena 3 CNN: (a) multiple individual studio windows (Sinteza Zilei cu Mihai Gadea, 2024a); (b) multiple windows—host and illustration (Sinteza Zilei cu Mihai Gadea, 2024b).

6.2.3.3. Digi24

The multi-screen display is used without respecting any foreseeable pattern, which can sometimes be confusing. Windows appear in different patterns, numbers, displays, positions, and types of content (Figures 5a and 5b). The multiple-windows display is sometimes in total disrespect of any spatial orientation on the screen.

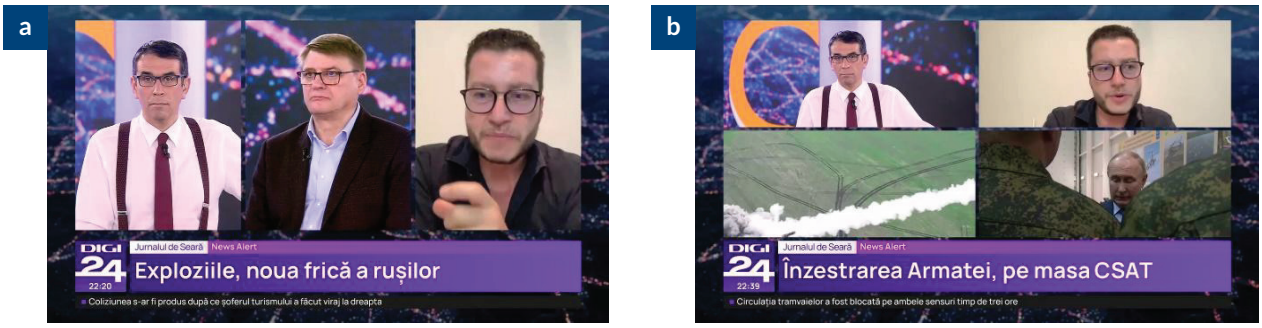

Figure 5. Multi-screen display in *Jurnalul de Seară*, Digi24: (a) multiple individual live windows (Digi24HD, 2024b); (b) multiple different windows (Digi24HD, 2024b).

6.2.3.4. Realitatea Plus

The structure of the show is simplistic and basic. The camera work is generally static and provides nothing more than single medium close-ups presented continuously on a multi-camera screen. Consequently, the majority of the show remains on the same multi-camera display, with minor variations dependent primarily on the number of guests (Figure 6a). The visual dynamism of the programme is virtually non-existent. On occasion, one of the windows may display an illustrative video or a still image of an individual being interviewed via telephone (Figure 6b).

Figure 6. Multi-screen display in *Culisele Statului Paralel*, Realitatea Plus: (a) multiple individual studio windows (Tudorel Bordeianu, 2024); (b) multiple windows—studio and illustration (Realitatea pe Net, 2024).

6.2.4. Host Presentation Styles

6.2.4.1. România TV

The leading talk show is presented by an experienced journalist, Victor Ciutacu. Mr. Ciutacu consistently adheres to a distinctive personal style. He typically wears a dark jacket and a white shirt, excluding the use of a necktie (Figure 7a). He displays a relaxed attitude, yet exudes an air of authority. He seldom exhibits any outward signs of amusement, presenting himself as a custodian of grave truths.

6.2.4.2. Antena 3 CNN

The leading talk show is hosted by Mihai Gâdea, who is also the manager of the television station. He is an experienced television journalist who has worked for Antena 3 for over two decades. He is consistently attired in a formal manner, donning dark suits and ties on the set (Figure 7b). He commences the programme with a monologue positioned in front of a screen. His voice is robust and unwavering, his intonation grave. His previous experience as a pastor is evident in his posture, attitude, gestures, and vocal delivery. Subsequently, he introduces the guests, takes his seat, and the debate commences.

6.2.4.3. Digi24

The programme *Jurnalul de Seară* is hosted by Cosmin Prelipceanu, an experienced television presenter who previously hosted the principal news programmes on TVR (Romanian Public Television) and Realitatea TV (now Realitatea Plus). He has been employed by Digi24 since its inception in 2012. He adopted the Larry King style, establishing the suspenders as his personal brand (see Figure 7c). The set design allows the presenter to move

around naturally, which he does occasionally. He commences the programme with a monologue positioned in front of a screen. His voice is characterised by a steady and relaxed tone. His previous experience as a news anchor is clearly discernible. The circular spatial configuration of the set facilitates communication between the host and each guest, as well as between guests.

6.2.4.4. Realitatea Plus

The leading talk show is hosted by Anca Alexandrescu, a journalist with a lengthy background as a media consultant for high-ranked politicians and state officials, as indicated in her publicly available curriculum vitae. It would appear that there is no dress code in place for the host. Ms. Alexandrescu appears to randomly select a variety of vibrant and eclectic clothing, ranging from business attire to more flamboyant blouses and dresses (Figure 7d). Her gestures and vocal performance suggest to the viewer that she possesses knowledge beyond what she is willing to divulge, given her extensive experience with politicians. One can discern whether a guest on the programme is affable or not, as the host becomes sarcastic when addressing those she deems unfriendly, thereby altering the tone of her voice.

On occasion, the host assumes a dominant position, forcing the guest to look up at her as he sits on a chair (Figure 8). This posture may be interpreted as an indication that the politician is responding to the journalist's inquiry before the audience represented by the latter. However, from the perspective of journalism, this is a highly unethical practice.

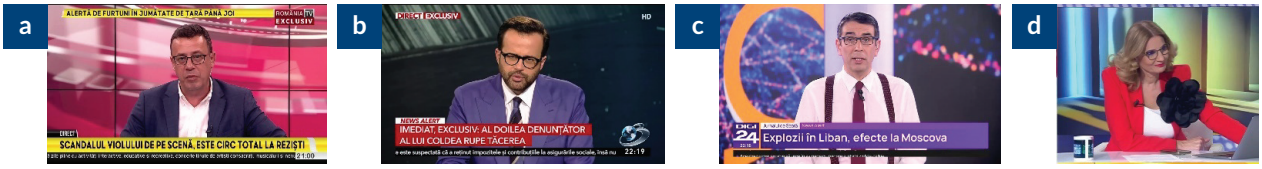

Figure 7. Host presentation styles: (a) Victor Ciutacu (Romania TV, 2024); (b) Mihai Gâdea (Sinteza Zilei cu Mihai Gadea, 2024b); (c) Cosmin Prelipceanu (Digi24 HD, 2024a); (d) Anca Alexandrescu (Realitatea Plus, 2024a).

Figure 8. Host–guest relationship. Source: Realitatea Plus (2024b).

6.2.5. Visual Language and Graphics

6.2.5.1. România TV

The programme begins with a graphic introduction, after which the host is gradually lit up, and the camera pushes into a medium close-up (Figure 9a). After a brief welcome message, a multi-camera split screen is initiated, which remains in place for the majority of the programme. Apart from brief and sporadic illustration

shots sustaining the topics, the screen is consistently partitioned, overwhelming the viewer with multiple sources of information emerging from the television screen, which presents a continuous stream of tabloid and suburban content (Figure 9b).

It is not uncommon for reporters to provide live coverage of ongoing debates, thereby showcasing a dress code that is consistent with that of the TV channel's viewers. This suggests that journalists on screen are no longer regarded as TV personalities; rather, they are perceived as authentic representatives of their audiences.

The titles themselves are characterised by a bold and striking visual design. The messages supporting the central topic are reminiscent of police warning tapes, with black capital letters on a bright yellow background, which contributes to the pervasive sense of restlessness and agitation conveyed by the programme as a whole. The messages are composed in an ultimatum-type of communication and are typically presented in a colloquial, suburban, and violent language (e.g. "Male members of cabinet fight like chicks"; "Gang of thieves loots the horror hospital"; Figure 9c). Other titles indicating the transition to the following topic are presented with the word "NEXT" displayed in red against a white background, accompanied by the text in black capital letters. This visual composition contributes to the perception of urgency. The language employed is characterised by harshness, violence, and a tendency to incite.

6.2.5.2. Antena 3 CNN

Illustration videos and photos are employed extensively, as well as graphics. These types of high-quality footage and video contribute to an engaging and dynamic discourse and presentation. The titles are identical to those used by their affiliate, CNN International, in both bandwidths and colours (red or white) and fonts, thereby giving the show an international look (Figures 9d and 9e). Considering all the aforementioned aspects, this may be considered the best-produced show broadcast on any news channel in Romania.

6.2.5.3. Digi24

The dynamic range is satisfactory and contributes to an overall positive impression of the programme. The spatial relationships and visual coherence of the dialogues could be enhanced by implementing a revised seating configuration and a more meticulous approach to the management of multi-camera screen displays. The titles are of an adequate standard, exhibiting a satisfactory degree of composition and intelligibility. The visual identity of the station is respected by all the graphics, titles, jingles, colours, and fonts. In breaking news situations, to manage this non-routine occurrence, in order to stress the urgency of the situation (Berkowitz, 1992), producers change the colour of the background of the titles from purple to orange (Figure 1d).

6.2.5.4. Realitatea Plus

The dynamics and rhythm of the show rely entirely on the discussion and energy provided by the participants, which is often lacking. The spatial relationships provided by the set are minimal, as previously discussed. The titles are typically presented in a stark and urgent manner, written in black capital letters against a yellow background. This stylistic choice aligns with the visual identity of the station, which employs red and white as its primary colours. This creates a sense of immediacy and urgency, akin to the approach

Figure 9. Visual language and graphics: (a) dark opening (Romania TV, 2024); (b) tabloid content (Romania TV, 2024); (c) suburban language (Romania TV, 2024); (d) dramatisation and graphics (Sinteza Zilei cu Mihai Gadea, 2024c); (e) graphic illustration (Sinteza Zilei cu Mihai Gadea, 2024a).

observed in the case of România TV. Nevertheless, the language employed is less violent than that used by România TV. Sometimes, segments sourced from alternative platforms, predominantly social media, are exhibited in their entirety on the screen. When graphics are incorporated into the visual presentation, they are typically positioned within the windows and pertain to either headlines or graphic representations of the subject matter. In some instances, both are combined.

6.3. Sound Design and Management

6.3.1. România TV

In terms of sound, it is predominantly diegetic. With the exception of the introductory segment, during which the host provides a brief overview of the topics to be discussed, all sound comes from microphones, either live or pre-recorded in the case of interviews or segments sourced from social media. While the audio quality is not of the highest standard, the sound direction is effective in ensuring that the programme's content is audible and intelligible.

6.3.2. Antena 3 CNN

The audio quality and sound management are of a high standard throughout the show. The sound is predominantly diegetic, captured live by microphones, with effective control of sound direction, ensuring that the audio content is consistently equalised and intelligible. A loop jingle provides accompaniment to the monologue, and its level and rhythm are appropriate. Some explanatory or illustrative items incorporate pre-recorded sound, which does not impinge upon the audio elements captured on set.

6.3.3. Digi24

The production demonstrates a commendable standard of audio quality and effective sound management, which is evident throughout the performance. The sound is predominantly diegetic, captured live by

microphones, with effective control of sound direction, ensuring that the audio content is consistently equalised and intelligible. A loop jingle is employed to accompany the monologue, and its level and rhythm are deemed appropriate. Some explanatory or illustrative sequences make use of pre-recorded sound, which does not impinge upon the audio elements captured on set.

6.3.4. Realitatea Plus

The audio is basic and uncomplicated. The majority of the audio is diegetic, captured by microphones on the set in a straightforward and accessible configuration, as there are only a few guests on the set. Short segments at the beginning and occasionally at the conclusion of the programme are accompanied by a jingle loop. Occasionally, pre-recorded sound is incorporated into the programme, featuring materials that are not part of the live broadcast.

7. Discussion

The current study found that the sampled prime-time news talk shows share several prominent features (RQ1). All are live, studio-based productions hosted by experienced journalists and include remote online feeds for reporters or guests. The commonly employed multi-screen grid-type display, fragmenting the unity of action by showcasing concurrent interactions in various patterns and numbers of windows, supports Caldwell's (2020) concept of televisuality as adapting to technological and social changes. Multi-screen displays result in a diluted visual experience as close-ups of participants dominate, reducing the overall coherence of dialogue and interaction.

Nonetheless, significant visual contrasts emerge between channels (RQ2). România TV and Realitatea Plus adhere to a traditional, static style characterised by unchanging sets, minimal shot composition, poor lighting, and subpar sound management. In contrast, Antena 3 CNN and Digi24 have embraced a dynamic, modern aesthetic with modernized sets, effective lighting, nuanced directing, and superior sound quality. These differences extend to host presentations, with each channel's host adopting distinctive attire and style choices, further distinguishing the programmes visually (Table 2).

Also, post-broadcast challenges (RQ3) to aesthetic features of broadcast television (Keinonen, 2016) can be identified in the visual elements, which significantly influence audience perception. For instance, the fragmented multi-screen display and lack of continuity emphasise competition over dialogue, creating a chaotic impression rather than fostering meaningful engagement. Additionally, channels with higher production values, such as Antena 3 CNN and Digi24, likely project a more credible and polished image, potentially shaping viewer trust and loyalty. Despite the aesthetic and technical shortcomings of România TV, it maintains market leadership, suggesting that factors beyond visual quality, such as content strategy or audience alignment, play a crucial role in the post-broadcast era.

Table 2. Summary of key visual features across channels.

Category	Key features
1. Visual production elements	
1a. Set design and studio space	România TV & Realitatea Plus: Static, unchanging sets over an extended period. Antena 3 CNN & Digi24: Significant improvement to set design, offering modern and dynamic visual aesthetics.
1b. Lighting and camera work	România TV & Realitatea Plus: Limited shots, basic lighting schemes, and static visuals. Antena 3 CNN & Digi24: Complex camera work, effective lighting, and nuanced directing for a polished presentation.
1c. Multi-screen displays	All stations use multi-screen grid displays extensively, with varying patterns and numbers of windows, which disrupts the unity of dialogue and interaction, creating fragmented visual impressions. Close-up shots lose impact due to the abundance of concurrent screens and reduced shot sizes.
2. Host presentation styles	Common role: All hosts act as mediators, facilitating dialogue and maintaining control. Behaviours: Hosts raise their voice or adopt sarcasm to manage discussions. Attire: Mihai Gâdea (Antena 3 CNN): business suits; Victor Ciutacu (România TV): white shirt and black jacket; Cosmin Prelipceanu (Digi24): shirt, suspenders, tie; Anca Alexandrescu (Realitatea Plus): eclectic styles.
3. Visual language and graphics	România TV & Realitatea Plus: Simplistic, rough visuals lacking dynamic graphic elements. Antena 3 CNN & Digi24: Enhanced use of well-designed visual features such as backgrounds, floors, and spaces, contributing to a sophisticated on-screen presentation.
4. Sound design and management	România TV & Realitatea Plus: Deficiencies in sound management, including persistent echo. Antena 3 CNN & Digi24: Superior sound quality and management, aligning with their advanced visual presentation.
Overall visual signature	România TV & Realitatea Plus: Traditional, static visual style and production. Antena 3 CNN & Digi24: Contemporary, dynamic style with improved aesthetics and technology.

8. Conclusion

The Romanian news television market is characterised by a high level of competition and a diverse range of channels, marking a still oversaturated TV mediascape, in spite of the notable decline in the size of the television-viewing public over the past decade, with the ratings and market share of news television reaching an all-time low. The market leader in the news segment, România TV, is visually obsolete, addressing a public that has been familiar with this type of visual presentation for decades. In this context, visuality is often subordinated to sensationalism and moral panic, driven by editorial policies shaped by the lack of transparency and the political affiliations of private media owners (Toma et al., 2023). These dynamics are deeply rooted

in a Romanian media landscape influenced by a complex interplay of cultural, historical, and political factors, which collectively define how media operate and how they are perceived by the public (Gross, 2023).

Overall, the findings align with existing research suggesting that both visual and textual codes and conventions are strategically used in news programmes to craft a compelling representation of reality (Bignell & Woods, 2022). This is evident in the fragmented visual signature, which emphasises figures of authority—such as academics, analysts, and political figures—to enhance the perceived credibility of the news content (Lunt et al., 2012). Such visual techniques serve to reinforce the programmes' authority and trustworthiness in the eyes of the audience.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Andreea Alina Mogoș is a professor at the Department of Journalism and Digital Media at Babeș-Bolyai University. In 2009, she obtained a PhD in sociology from Babeș-Bolyai University and a PhD in information and communication sciences from Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis with the thesis *Media Representations of the Romanians in French Daily Newspapers*, having obtained her habilitation in 2016. Her research interests focus on the mixed-methods approach of textual and visual media frames and representations, and the transformation of media genres.

Constantin Trofin is a lecturer at the Department of Journalism and Digital Media, Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. His research focuses on visual journalism and political communication, particularly televised electoral campaigns and the recent evolution in visual news reporting and production. He holds a PhD in sociology from Babeș-Bolyai University. His previous significant work as a TV producer, anchor, and executive has greatly influenced his teaching and research activity.

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