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Streaming difference(s): Netflix and the branding of diversity

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Abstract

With Since 2020, Netflix has regularly emphasized the diversity of representation (racial, sexual, gender, etc.) the platform provides through its content. Indeed, following the publication of its first diversity report in 2021, the streamer positions itself as a driver of inclusion for underrepresented communities in the film and television industries. This article examines how Netflix rhetorically frames the emphasis on diversity in its corporate communication. Based on a thematic analysis of Netflix's press releases (N=800), it explores how Netflix uses its branding of diversity to generate a transnational appeal. This article outlines four strategies, which, taken together, highlight the cultural and industrial practices deployed by the streamer to gain competitive advantages.

Key words

Netflix; Diversity; Television branding; Transnational television; Television studies; SVOD

Introduction

In 2021, Netflix published its first diversity report detailing the make-up of its talents across all US commissioned films and series released between 2018 and 2019. The report shows that, overall, Netflix is outpacing the global entertainment industry with regards to the representation and inclusion of underrepresented groups. With the report, Netflix reiterates its pledge to be the voice of change, expressing the hope that such an audit will become the benchmark of the entire industry (Sarandos, 2021).

While such decision is laudable and certainly apropos, we contend it is not anodyne. Throughout its corporate communication, Netflix stresses the company's commitment to represent its audience in all its diversity—that is, ethnic, sexual or linguistic. In fact, as Netflix progressively expands outside the frontiers of the Western world, it seems that this emphasis on diversity—hereafter the diversity strategy—is a key apparatus to Netflix's transnational expansion. This commitment, in turn, appears to justify Netflix's diversification of content in order to appeal to broader audiences.

This article examines how Netflix rhetorically frames this strategy across different markets by asking: how does Netflix brand its narrative about diversity? Instead of appraising the company's commitment, this article proposes an original contribution to current studies on and theorisations of Subscription-Video-On-Demand (hereafter SVOD) services by using Netflix as case study. A growing body of work has explored said SVOD services either from the vantage point of production (Castro and Cascajosa, 2020), distribution (Lotz, 2018a) or consumption (Turner, 2019). Yet, few studies have looked at the narratives and discourses that SVOD services use to justify and organise these industrial practices (Crawford, 2019; Wayne, 2018). Moreover, while Netflix's branding, particularly in relation to diversity, is under growing scrutiny in television research (Elkins, 2021), few studies have provided an in-depth examination of how a) SVODs deploy their branding across different markets and b) use it to secure a global footprint in the entertainment industry. Following Lotz (2021a) and adding to Jenner's grammar of transnationalism (Jenner, 2018), this article investigates the cultural impact(s) of streaming platforms and expands current theorisations on Netflix's expansion by focusing specifically on how the streamer uses its branding of diversity to create a transnational appeal.

The research is based on a thematic analysis of Netflix press releases (N=800). Such approach allows, on the one hand, to understand the performative nature of Netflix's corporate texts—how the streamer makes sense of itself. On the other hand, this analysis

highlights the ways in which they travel and influence the industry at large. In terms of critical framework, this article is informed by theories of media industries (Caldwell, 2006; Havens et al., 2009; Havens and Lotz, 2017). Using elements of production culture (Caldwell, 2006), the media industries perspective, with a focus on industrial narratives, is a useful approach to consider the relationships between industries and the global trends of the television industry. Based on our analysis, we identify four strategies used in Netflix's branding of diversity. Taken together, these strategies highlight how the streamer exerts specific circulations of power with distinct implications for (local) industries and audiences. These operations of power, in turn, allow Netflix to uniquely juggle its transnational dimension with its national ambitions.

The global age of Netflix: a (r)evolution for television?

During the last two decades, SVOD platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime or Disney+ have transformed the norms and practices of television. Among these, Netflix has become one of the most significant platforms due to the (quasi) globality of its service (Jin, 2021). Over the years, the company has cultivated a particular business model based on four distinct elements: a) significant increase in revenue through a monthly fee-based business model (Lotz, 2018b); b) a bold and costly move into original content production (Jenner, 2016); c) the use of algorithmic recommendations to segment existing audiences and attract new subscribers (Elkins, 2019; Lotz, 2021a); d) a swift transnational expansion positioning Netflix as a world leading entertainment service (Lobato, 2019).

One of the implications of Netflix's transnational expansion has been a rethinking of what the increasing power of SVOD platforms imply for global television studies. While critical attention has been paid to Netflix in particular, Lotz (2021b) argues that there is still a paucity of adequate vocabulary to theorise such services. A number of attempts have been made to understand the global expansion of Netflix. Largely, such attempts have focused on regionally specific cases exploring how the streamer penetrates individual national markets (D'Arma et al., 2021; Raats and Evens, 2021).

In contrast to explorations of individual national markets, recent scholarship adopts the lens of transnational television to theorise the global expansion of SVOD platforms (Lobato, 2019; Lotz, 2021a). Within this view, it is argued that understanding services such as Netflix requires going further than national case approaches to examine their transnational dimensions, that is, the ways in which they transcend and negotiate notions of global and local. Hence, it is no longer possible to view Netflix as a single

service operating under the same conditions in every media landscape; rather, Netflix should be apprehended as a federation of national services tied together in one platform (Lobato, 2018; Lobato and Lotz, 2020). In this regard, Netflix's transnational expansion is understood as a multisided process of localisation whereby, the more the company's global audience grows, the more differentiated its programming, organisation and corporate infrastructures become (Iordache, 2021).

Thus, to stay competitive on a global scale, it becomes imperative for Netflix to devise strategies of production and distribution that allow the service to adapt to and reach an increasingly broad audience. Such strategies are what Mareike Jenner calls 'grammar of transnationalism' (Jenner, 2018: 226), the heterogenous ways in which Netflix seeks to generate a transnational appeal. These strategies epitomise Netflix's particular negotiations of notions of global and local: On the one hand, unlike domestic broadcasters seeking first to attract a national audience, Netflix's content, is, from the outset, destined to a global audience (Lotz, 2021b). On the other hand, and as influential literature on transnational television has shown (Chalaby, 2005a), transnational broadcasters such as Netflix cannot neglect the 'locality of taste' (Lobato, 2019: 133)—that is audiences' appetite for local content—if they wish to remain competitive. Therefore, one of the distinctive strategies identified by Jenner (2018) is what she terms 'the transnational value system' (Jenner, 2018: 230). She contends that, to ensure the transnational circulation and reception of its content, Netflix appeals to ideals of liberalism, democracy and diversity in its content and its promotion. Indicative of a global culture, these values create a powerful transnational appeal as they represent a set of shared norms that not only resonate across (most) cultures, but also speak to the experiences of (most) individual viewers. This echoes what Evan Elkins (2021) terms streaming diplomacy. Looking specifically at Netflix, he argues that whether through its policies, branding strategies or programming, the streamer attempts to promote itself as a global curator of progressive and culturally diverse content. Yet, this branding is not innocent; rather, by embodying a cosmopolitan ethos, Netflix aims at building a cultural (policy) apparatus with enough influence to smooth out its global expansion. Therefore, before delving into Netflix's branding of diversity, we first discuss branding practices within the television industry, as well as their confluence with diversity.

Branding and the business of diversity in television industries

Branding traditionally refers to the endowment of products/services with the power of

brands in order to differentiate them from the competition (Kotler and Keller, 2011). While the practice of branding is commonly perceived as an economic tool, branding is in fact a ‘socially constructed text’ (O’Reilly, 2005: 582) providing consumers with a specific way of talking about and seeing the world. Consequently, branding goes further than the sole ascription of a logo; it creates the cultural context in which commodities are to be used, conjuring the series of images, themes or values associated to the branded products (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Cultural diversity, defined as the sum of various kind of difference—ethnic, racial, or cultural—and their articulations with gender and sexuality (Siapera, 2010), has been widely addressed in media studies. However, several critics (Fuller, 2010; Kohnen, 2015) have also pointed out that, while this line of research has produced groundbreaking results, little attention has been paid to the ways in which the representation of diversity is also part of the corporate strategies of media brands.

To this end, Melanie Kohnen (2015) introduces the term ‘branded diversity’ to show how, to further cement their brand identities, television channels capitalized on controversies around race, gender and/or sexuality to promote themselves as edgy and cool (Fuller, 2010; Himberg, 2014). From the use of blackness as marker of an urban channel (Fuller, 2010; Gray, 2021) to the use of queer identity to promote a liberal and open-minded network (Aslinger, 2009), a well-documented scholarship shows how, particularly in the 1990s, the representation of identity categories stemmed from an industrial shift within the television industry motivated by corporate interests. Indeed, in the competitive context of TVIII, the third ‘period’ of television history, distinct identity categories—gay, black, women, etc.—emerged as ‘textual selling points’ (Aslinger, 2009: 109) designed to boost subscriptions, secure specific audience segments and provide a distinctive escape from mainstream programming. This echoes Julia Himberg’s use of multicasting (Himberg, 2014) and her assertion that the branding of diversity allowed cable channels to tap into multiple markets at once with the premise that ‘there is someone for everyone to identify with and desire’ (Himberg, 2014: 296). Eerily reminiscent of Netflix trademark adage ‘stories from anywhere and loved everywhere’ (Sarandos, 2021), scholarship on the branding of diversity shows that such practice is (almost) always used, either to sustain media expansion—adapting to the demands of (new) audiences—or, as a strategy of distinction at times of heightened competition.

While television has arguably entered its fourth (r)evolution (TVIV or the fourth ‘period’ of television history) with the rise of SVOD (Jenner, 2016), recent research

shows that branding is also an important practice for new players. Focusing on Amazon and Netflix, Michael Wayne (2018) analyses how both platforms use a distinctive approach to branding: whereas Amazon forges relations with established brands such as HBO to draw customers to the e-commerce business, Netflix, in contrast, strives not so much to build a distinctive identity around its original programming, but positions itself as ‘the audience’s primary point of identification’ (Wayne, 2018: 2). He concludes that this ‘portal-as-brand strategy’ (Wayne, 2018:13) signals the obsolescence of traditional television branding practices for a streamer such as Netflix. Although such conclusion certainly remains relevant, this article adds a new layer to this analysis by suggesting that the portal-as-brand-strategy may have been efficient at a time when Netflix was the primary—if not only—SVOD service available in most countries. Today, with the rise of Disney+ or HBO Max and its recent merger with Discovery+, all offshoots of established legacy brands, Netflix needs to distinguish itself in order to stay competitive. Thus, we contend that in an effort to build a global brand, Netflix does not relegate such practices to the margins; rather, Netflix’s branding of diversity reiterates and reinvents industrial dynamics that have operated in previous decades of the television industry.

However, while the concept of branded diversity has been investigated in relation to cable and broadcast channels, few studies (see, however, Christian, 2020; Jenner, 2018) have considered the relationships between SVOD services and the branding of diversity. Hence, before presenting the results of our research, the following section outlines the methodological framework behind this article.

Methodology

This article is based on a thematic analysis of Netflix’s press releases (N=800) published between December 2019 and January 2022. A thematic analysis (hereafter TA) is defined as a set of techniques used to systematically identify and organize themes across data. Contrary to other methods such as discourse analysis, TA puts less emphasis on the complex theoretical perspectives on language and focus on the meanings or themes conveyed to describe social reality (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

The aim of the empirical research was to look at how the theme of diversity was used in Netflix’s branding, particularly in its press releases. In the context of our study, the theme of diversity emerged organically, after reading several press articles focused on Netflix and its global expansion. The researchers thus decided to explore whether the company’s emphasis on diversity, already discernible in the press, was also verified in

their corporate communication. Netflix newsroom (<https://about.netflix.com/en/newsroom>)¹ is the company's news website where all public announcements regarding the streamer are published. The website is translated in 20 languages and makes use of geo-localization to filter the news feed, distinguishing between: a) regional news—news specific to a region (for example, Europe) or to a country (for example, Belgium); and, b) global news, for example, news related to regions/countries outside the region/country of the reader. It is important to note, however, that neither the geo-localisation, nor the language chosen, affect the type of news available to the reader; indeed, when changing the parameters of the geo-localisation, we found that the only difference in the news feed was the disposition—regional versus global—of the different news items. Moreover, translated press releases did not exhibit any difference from the original in English. For the purpose of this research, we chose Europe as location and English as language. The website further gives the option to filter the news feed based on five categories: 1) Business; 2) Entertainment; 3) Innovation; 4) Social impact; 5) All news. For this research, we chose the last category—All News.

To collect the data from Netflix newsroom, we used 'Instant Data Scraper' (https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/instantdatascraper/ofaokhiedipichpaobibbna_hnkdoijah), an automated data extraction tool freely available via Google Web Store. We divided the data collection process in two simultaneous rounds: a first round between December 2020 and June 2021 focused on collection of press releases for the European region—United Kingdom included—(N=300); a second round between January 2021 and March 2022 to collect the global press releases (N=500). At the end of each round of data collection, press releases were saved in a PDF-format to be analysed.

Once collected, the press releases were uploaded in the data analysis software NVIVO. In addition, a codebook was developed to ensure the efficient management of large volumes of data. The codebook was divided into six large codes: 1) Audience; 2) Production; 3) Content; 4) Diversity; 5) Distribution; 6) Industry. The codebook is based on the combination of two approaches to qualitative analysis: on the one hand a deductive or top-down approach starting from existing theories in television studies to explore the data. This theory-led perspective captures the explicit meanings of the data, staying close to the data without interpreting it. On the other hand, an inductive or bottom-up approach using what is in the data as starting point. This data-led approach already provides a

deeper level of analysis, capturing implicit meanings or ideas present in the data (Terry et al., 2017). With the coding process completed, the theme of diversity as well as a set of subthemes emerged very clearly from the data. In the following section we present the findings of the thematic analysis.

Streaming difference(s): Netflix and the branding of diversity

Inclusion takes roots at Netflix

To understand how Netflix uses its branding of diversity to create a transnational appeal, this section first examines what Netflix understands under the term ‘diversity’ and outlines the most common subthemes or dimensions associated with diversity in the streamer’s corporate communication. To be clear, these dimensions are not mutually exclusive, but constantly overlap. Yet, we present them separately to give a more accurate analysis of Netflix’s strategy.

- **Racial and ethnic diversity:** in this subtheme, Netflix puts an emphasis on the global representation of marginalised communities (that is, Black, Latinx, AAPI—Asian American and Pacific Islander, and similar) and actively promotes its investments in local organisations supporting diversity in the television industry across the world;
- **Gender diversity:** in this subtheme, Netflix puts a strong emphasis on the representation of women on/off screen and reinforces the promotion of its investments in, and collaboration with grassroots and supranational organisations;
- **Sexual diversity:** in this subtheme, Netflix’s discourse is focused on the inclusion—on/off screen—of strong LGBTQ+(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer) characters and leads. Furthermore, the streamer tackles explicit conversations on sexuality and consent, especially with young audiences;
- **Age diversity:** with the focus on age, the streamer puts an emphasis on facilitating access to the television industry for young talents, especially young writers and directors;
- **Linguistic diversity:** within this subtheme, Netflix mostly emphasizes its newest foray into non-US content as well as its increased investments in

dubbing and subtitles options.

Branding diversity: A tale of four strategies

Based on the qualitative analysis of Netflix's press releases and supplemented by data from the press, the second part of the study outlines how these different dimensions are translated and deployed across different contexts. This framework provides an analytical lens to expand current theorizations on Netflix's transnational expansion. Rather than focusing on specific industrial processes such as distribution or production, we explore how Netflix constructs and attempts to assert its (cultural) power through its emphasis on diversity. Hence, while providing examples from specific countries, our investigation spans beyond in-depth analysis of individual markets to focus on particular patterns discernible across national or geographic boundaries.

The findings of the thematic analysis allow us to identify four strategies used by Netflix in its branding of diversity that we term as follows: 1) a strategy of differentiation; 2) a strategy of representation; 3) a strategy of indigenization, and 4) a strategy of cosmopolitanism. Each of these different aspects exemplify a distinctive emphasis in Netflix's diversity strategy. For the sake of precision, we discuss them separately. Yet, this does not mean that they are (always) exclusive to a particular country/region. Instead, they represent a set of patterns discernible in the streamer's rhetoric. In the next section we delve deeper into the description of each of these strategies.

A strategy of differentiation

In marketing literature, differentiation refers to a strategy devised to outperform rival brands/products by providing unique features or services to make the product/brand desirable and foster customer loyalty (Sharp and Dawes, 2001). In the context of the present study, our findings show that Netflix uses its emphasis on diversity in its corporate communication to highlight meaningful difference between the service and its competitors. In a press release presenting the latest instalment of the \$5M Netflix Fund for black creators and youth (Mensah, 2021), Anne Mensah, Vice President UK originals series deplores that, when it comes to inclusion and diversity, the UK industry remains slow to change:

At Netflix we believe in stories from everywhere for everyone and we are determined to help realise that ambition fully. I believe the UK industry is

changing. And although this change is slow, the wealth of young diverse British voices fighting their way to the top of the industry fills me with hope and excitement. (...). But this is not enough. I believe we need to do more, not just to support the current generation of British talent, but also to develop a more inclusive pipeline of upcoming creatives across the entire production process (Mensah, 2021).

By highlighting its commitment to diversity, Netflix promotes itself in its communication as a game changer in an industry that is either too slow or too unwilling to change. In this context, Netflix presents itself as a platform set on dismantling traditional structures to usher the television industry into a new era. In a press release following the announcement of the Netflix Fund for Creative Equity (Bajaria, 2021), Bela Bajaria, Head of Global TV, introduces the company's initiatives to support female storytellers by writing:

Today, I'm proud to work at a company that has brought many firsts for women to life in front of and behind the camera: the first Indigenous Mexican Academy Award actress nominee; the first Korean female stand-up special; the first Black woman to direct a superhero movie; and the first transgender woman to ink an overall deal with a studio. But we're still only just getting started (Bajaria, 2021).

A strategy of representation

Pioneered in media studies by cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, representation refers to the process by which meaning is attributed, produced, and exchanged between members of a culture using images, signs or language that depict a particular object or practice (Hall, 1997). Importantly, Hall suggests that representation is never a harmless depiction of reality; rather, it is an exercise of power determining what kinds of knowledge will be allowed to exist (Hall, 1997).

In the context of this study, the strategy of representation describes how Netflix uses every dimension of its diversity strategy to showcase its commitment to its audience. Within this strategy, the main narrative of the streamer's communication is that there is on Netflix a story for every taste, identity and personality; this in turn markets the platform as being for everyone, regardless of cultural differences. In a press release announcing the latest slate of content from India (Shergill, 2021), Monika Shergill, VP Content India declares:

At Netflix, we love to tell stories that bring us together. Films and series told authentically by Indian creators you love as well as voices that are new. But how do we identify that one story that everyone will love? We don't. Each and everyone of us have our own tastes and moods and all of us want to see our lives reflected on screen (Shergill, 2021).

This statement echoes what Eric Pallotta, Vice President Brand, declares in a press release presenting 'One story Away' (Pallotta, 2020), the latest campaign praising Netflix's commitment to storytelling diversity:

These words perfectly encapsulate the passion for storytelling that lies at the heart of what Netflix - and the creators we work with all over the world - are trying to bring to our members. People have very different tastes and moods. But no matter who you are or where you are, we're all only one story away from seeing, feeling and connecting more (Pallotta, 2020).

This strategy of representation goes hands in hands with the differentiation strategy described above: by committing to more inclusive stories, Netflix signals to its audience its distinction from other cultural actors unwilling or unable to heed to the demands of their public. Interestingly, our research shows that the strategy of representation is most often targeted at younger audience. Using signature shows such as *Sex Education* (2019-present), the streamer, in its communication, presents itself as the voice of a new generation and promotes its programming as a way for young audiences to vicariously negotiate their way through the complexities of society. In a press release (Wheeler, 2021) announcing the commission of a coming-of age romance about two boys, Alexi Wheeler, Director of Kids and Family content says:

We are especially aware that younger audiences are looking for relatable and sincere stories dealing with real life subjects; not shying away from elements of their own lives (...). This is a story that deserves to be told. (...). We care deeply that all young people see themselves reflected in our content, and are hopeful that many people, whatever their age or identity, will see themselves in this bold and uplifting series (Wheeler, 2021).

A strategy of indigenization

The term indigenization, used here in its primary anthropological definition, refers to the act of altering a product or idea to suit a local culture (Alatas, 2004). This definition bears similarity with what transnational television studies describe as localisation (Chalaby, 2005b); however, while the concept of localisation traditionally focuses on issues of language (that is, dubbing) and local programming, our understanding of indigenisation goes further than textual features to encompass the peculiar strategy used by Netflix to assert its cultural legitimacy.

One of the major obstacles faced by the service during its transnational expansion has been the lack of local content, especially in countries with a vibrant (trans)regional film industry such as India or South Korea. Accordingly, the streamer has boosted its local production, putting an emphasis on the linguistic diversity of the service. More importantly, in its communication, Netflix uses its diversity strategy—especially linguistic and age diversity—to present itself as matchmaker, supporting local creatives, introducing local talents to the world, and vice versa. Presenting Netflix’s new production facilities in South Korea, Amy Reinhard, Netflix VP Studio Operations and Consumer Products states in an official press release (Bing and Ko, 2021):

Through our multi-year content partnership (...) we’re also introducing the best creatives made by Korea’s leading entertainment companies to the world. These efforts enable us to present much more diverse and varied selections of what to watch to our 195 million members around the world (Bing and Ko, 2021).

Through its different funding programs, Netflix reiterates its intention to provide ‘job placement for up-and-coming talent globally’ (Sarandos, 2021). A significant part of the streamer’s investment is now, for instance, directed toward Sub-Saharan Africa, a new market the streamer is aggressively targeting. In a press release announcing the Netflix Creative Equity Scholarship Fund (CESF) (Seabi, 2022), Ben Amadasu, Director of Content in Africa declares:

Netflix is excited by the potential of the next generation of storytellers and we’re committed to investing in the future of African storytelling in the long-term. (...). We believe there are great stories to be told from Africa and we want to play our

part by supporting students who are passionate about the film and TV industry so they too, can ultimately contribute to the creative ecosystem by bringing more unique voices and diverse perspectives to African storytelling that our global audiences find appealing (Seabi, 2022).

This emphasis on attracting new voices from new markets is again noticeable in a press release (Stanhope, 2019) documenting Netflix's first Creative Collective Showrunner's Workshop gathering eleven writers from six different countries. In this press release, Nicole Norwood, Director of International Originals in Italy states about the workshop:

As we continue to grow our slate of original local content, it's increasingly important to nurture and empower new voices in our emerging markets. We believe this program will give writers the foundation to begin their showrunning careers and help them to hone these skills so that they can then pass them along to future generations of writers (Stanhope, 2019).

A strategy of cosmopolitanism

Despite the complexities involved in conceptualising the term, cosmopolitanism at its core, speaks of a shared belonging to the world community. In its cultural dimension, this concept challenges the idea that the world is divided into bounded national/cultural identities; instead, cultural cosmopolitanism claims that individuals' identities/cultures are shaped by and through contact with others (Appiah, 2007; Beck, 2000). Looking specifically at Netflix, the cosmopolitan strategy shows how, in its communication, the streamer uses the diversity of its content and global audiences, especially at the linguistic level, to promote itself as a vehicle of tolerance and empathy across the world. In a press release announcing the new slate of Korean content (Ko and Cho, 2020), Minyoung Kim, Netflix's VP of Korean content declares:

It's amazing to see how these Korean 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 and Cho, 2020).

Through this strategy, Netflix presents itself in its communication as a platform introducing global audiences to new cinematic experiences. In a press release announcing new slate of Indian originals movies (Netflix, 2019), Srishti Behl Arya, Director International Original Film India states:

When Netflix launched in India, we changed the way Indian audiences enjoy their films. (...). The depth of talent and vision of our creators is enabling us to create films our members will love. We want to be a home for India's finest filmmakers where their stories travel to more people than ever before (Netflix, 2019).

Yet, the cosmopolitan strategy also highlights how Netflix, through its original programming, reinforces its transnational brand (Havens, 2018), by stretching the reach of its political and cultural influence beyond the limits of film and television. Indeed, by tying its content to global societal issues such as sexual violence or climate change, the streamer presents itself as an upright and progressive actor; this in turn, allows Netflix to create affinities with audiences across demographic, geographical and/or cultural differences, while solidifying its image as a culturally uplifting and democratizing platform (Elkins, 2021). Reporting in a press release (Abebreseh, 2020) on an event organised after the premiere of the second season of *Sex Education* (2019-present), the streamer prides its signature show for its open and raw discussions about sex, further emphasising how it is pushing conversations about sexuality through storylines on sexual assault. Talking about the famous 'bus scene' (*Sex Education* 2019, 2:7) during which Aimee, one of the main character of the series and one of the school's popular girl, is assaulted in broad daylight, Laurie Nunn, showrunner of the series, declares:

You can put it on a platform like Netflix and you can show people that that kind of thing is sexual assault. It's not hierarchy. We're not saying that one is worse than the other but I think it's about getting empowered. (...). I think that's a really good aim to have the storyline, and the show, to empower people to talk about it and to be comfortable (Abebreseh, 2020).

Through this strategy, Netflix symbolically re-asserts the cultural and moral value of the platform, presenting its programming as not so much guided by economic motives, but stemming from a desire to foster global cultural connections. In a press release (Netflix

Staff, 2022) celebrating the recent release of its latest movie, *Don't Look Up* (2021) and showcasing glowing reviews from climate scientists and activists, the streamer underscores the power of its content to generate worldwide conversations about climate change:

On its surface, *Don't Look Up* is a fictional comedy about a comet on a collision course with Earth. But in the weeks since its Dec. 24 release on Netflix, it's inspired some very serious discussions around climate change — and the need for action. (...). Many climate scientists and behavioral scientists who have been on the front lines of the climate crisis believe *Don't Look Up* offers an important lesson in how we can look at this ongoing crisis through a new lens to, hopefully, inspire action (Netflix Staff, 2022).

Conclusions and discussion: Netflix, the wind of change?

This article enriches the concept of grammar of transnationalism developed by Jenner (2018), and adds to current theorisations on SVOD services. Starting from Netflix's use of a transnational system of values, it delves deeper into how this system is operationalised in different contexts. By focusing on the diversity strategy, the research shows how Netflix appeals to a global frame of experiences and ideals, while at the same time addressing niche audiences through its distinctive promotion as the industry's wind of change. Hence, the findings presented in this article add to existing studies on SVOD services by highlighting the tremendous cultural power of a platform such as Netflix. Through the global circulation of its diversity strategy, Netflix does not only re-invent television; rather, it dominates cultural conversations worldwide by influencing prevailing norms and narratives about what it means to live in (multicultural) societies.

This article also shows that branding goes further than either the ascription of a logo or the rhetoric used in official communication. Rather, the narratives used to convey Netflix's various branding strategies have a direct influence on the streamer's production, distribution and/or investment strategies. In this article, Netflix's branding discourse serves as a proxy to understand the streamer's international positioning, that is the cultural and industrial practices deployed by Netflix to gain competitive advantages. Far from being exclusive to a particular territory, the four strategies outlined often overlap with one another, or are used conjointly in some markets, depending on the intentions of the streamer. Moreover, our research shows how Netflix distinctively negotiates its diversity

strategy by being more outspoken in some regions and/or countries than others. This, we suggest, reveals the streamer's effort to strike an unsteady balance between pursuing its global expansion while ensuring continuing access to lucrative markets (Khalil and Zayani, 2021). In what follows, we critically reflect on said practices as well as their potential consequences for (local) industries/audiences and television studies.

First, the differentiation strategy shows the ambivalent—and at time slightly insidious—tactics of a platform such as Netflix. While the streamer collaborates extensively with domestic legacy players (Afilipoaie et al., 2021), it clearly differentiates itself from them. This dual strategy allows Netflix to maintain preferential partnership(s) (most notably with local producers) essential to its integration into local markets, while directly putting pressure on local industries by taking advantage of national and/or cultural debates. Furthermore, the indigenisation strategy raises questions as to the (industrial) changes such collaborations will trigger for local industries. This strategy mingling production and structural support with local stories, talents and language resonates with the earlier era of glocalisation (Robertson, 1995) marked by media conglomerates' attempts to speak with a loud voice to local audiences (Szczepanik, 2021). However, the key difference in Netflix's strategy lies in the fact that its original programming is primarily aimed at transnational distribution (Jenner, 2018). As such, the focus on the local appears at time as a stepping stone to increase accessibility across foreign territories (Jenner, 2018: 228). For the streamer, connecting with audiences through discourses on diversity seems to be gradually as—if not more—important than commissioning local content. In that sense, Netflix challenges the well-known axiom of glocalisation according to which the local adaptation of a global product increases its distinctness and proximity with local audiences (Rohn, 2015; Straubhaar, 2007). By focusing less on the cultural specificity of its audience and programming, and putting more emphasis on how authentic and inclusive content crosses all forms of boundaries, Netflix is able to target and connect with distinctive transnational niche audiences in every market (Straubhaar et al., 2021). We argue that the image of Netflix as a supporter of local production, allows the streamer to balance its global dimension with its local ambitions. Indeed, with the strategy of indigenisation, Netflix puts its proximity with the local context to the fore, transforming itself into the prime partner of local creative communities. At the same time, through its collaboration with (young) creatives, the platform manages to attract a new generation of viewers, thereby further expanding its global reach.

Second, Netflix champions diversity in all its forms, however, it tends to fix as diverse everything and everyone not white, male or able-bodied (Jenner, 2018). In that sense, this emphasis on diversity becomes a technology of power, allowing the streamer to control the narrative on the very difference it seeks to express. Moreover, being a commercial platform, Netflix's diversity strategy is guided by economic motives. This does not mean that the intentions of the streamer are not genuine; instead, we consider the tensions that arise from attempting to amalgamate identity categories with corporate interests. As Arlene Davila (2001) argues, when cultural identities become addressed as market segments, misrepresentation inevitably ensues as corporations will tend to only promote the most marketable aspects of a culture. The growing attention to inclusion and diversity certainly contributes to a positive change in the global entertainment industry. Still, because the interest in representation proceeds from commercial interests, it is likely to fluctuate owing to technological or organisational changes, raising thus the uncomfortable question of the extent to which (structural) change within the television industry is indeed upon us. Put differently, had genuine strategies of inclusion and representation been the norm in the film and television industry, would Netflix care as much as they do now?

Thirdly, although Netflix is putting pressure on the entertainment industry, it may not entirely be the (r)evolution it purports to be. Instead, the streamer has found new ways of doing old things. Looking specifically at branding, the findings show that Netflix still relies on the tactics of cable and television channels in the TVIII or third era of television history in at least two ways. First, while our research confirms Wayne's portal-as-brand strategy (Wayne, 2018), it also highlights how Netflix uses its programming to point to the distinctive brand of the platform. By connecting signature shows such as *Sex Education* (2019-present) to its diversity narrative, Netflix attempts to convey, through its programming, the core values of empathy and tolerance of the platform, thereby cementing its portal-as-brand strategy.

Second, Netflix's branding of diversity is very much reminiscent of cable and broadcast channels' attempts to secure audiences and boost subscriptions. Yet, what is unprecedented is the scale at which the platform operates. By appealing to discourses of global citizenship and diversity, Netflix brands itself as translator across cultures able to speak to everyone. In that sense, diversity becomes a competitive advantage to attract audiences and accumulate commercial and cultural value. Hence, future research might expand the scope of the present study by looking at other SVOD services and their

branding of diversity. As a case in point, Amazon (Amazon Studios, 2021) recently published its diversity playbook, pledging to be more inclusive on-off screen. Netflix may not be a (r)evolution, but it certainly seems to be laying out the blueprints for other SVOD services to follow. For television studies, but also for society and creative industries it is worth pondering about the consequences such branding of diversity might have at the local level: will (should) Netflix really become the benchmark of the industry?

Declaration of conflicting interest

Please add if you have?

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