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NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN 30-MINUTE DIGITALLY DISTRIBUTED TV SERIES

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ABSTRACT. The rise of VoD services on the media market has produced key mutations in the television series industry at all levels. The dynamics of the tripartite relation between production, distribution and consumption gains new ground when a series of digital media distribution portals break the traditional linearity of television and adopt the aesthetics of media catalogs that users can access whenever and wherever they want. This new form of distribution allows the development of complex narrative structures, which were difficult to put into practice in traditional television, a medium whose evolution was defined by its own time constraints.

This paper explores the main narrative features of 30-minute series distributed by Video-on-Demand (VoD) portals over the past five years and explores the narrative differences between linear and digital shows, with a special focus on Netflix original productions.

Keywords: Netflix, TV series, comedy series, sitcom, narrrative structures, narrative complexity, streaming, media serialization

Context

The digital distribution of TV series has led to discussions (Lotz 2014; Tryon 2015; Newman şi Levine 2012; Romano 2013; Brojakowski 2015; Mittell 2015a; Pedersen 2016; Diez 2014; Mittell 2015b; Jenner 2015; Innocenti and Pescatore 2015) about a new "golden age"

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(Newman and Levine 2012) of the television industry, or the transition to its fourth evolutionary stage, TVIV (Jenner 2015), in which complex multidimensional stories reconfigure the media market and encourage new ways of media consumption. Jason Mittell (2015b) points out that, in order to understand the structural changes in recent series, we must look at the broader image of the television industry. According to him, one of the main factors that led to the emergence of narratively complex series was the change of the business model that used to define TV industry.

Audience fragmentation, a process that took place during the 1980s and 1990s, made narrative experiments possible, thus sparking off the creation of series that would satisfy the specific tastes of niche audiences. From this perspective, original HBO productions such as *The Sopranos* or *The Wire* played a catalysing role on the entire industry through atypical narrative mechanisms, complex characters and difficult topics. Taking HBO's example, other TV stations, such as FX or AMC, began to produce their own series based on the premise of a greater narrative complexity. Through their quality and association with an active and young audience, these productions have become a source of legitimacy for those TV stations.

The public discourse on a new type of television – as opposed to the traditional one - involving quality, complex, revolutionary productions, was then taken over by streaming services when they started producing their own content (Tryon 2015). In this way, digital television has become a place for the democratization of consumption, expanding user access opportunities and bringing "new opportunities for aesthetic progress, such as more 'complex' stories or Netflix's strategy of releasing all thirteen episodes of a TV season at once for 'non-linear' consumption" (Newman 2014, 134). In fact, according to Jason Mittel (2015b), the way stories are told are in close connection with the way they are consumed. Users' ability to control digital content (through pause, playback, skipping and fast-forwarding, or accessing any episode of the production) frees show creators from the need for narrative redundancy, which is one of the core features of linearly distributed

shows. While much of the traditional series dialogue was used to remind viewers of the events that have taken place in the past, new stories can get rid of most of these redundancies, without fear of confusion in consumers' minds, and develop extensive story arcs. Thus, digital distribution merges episodes into a new kind of whole, with a structure and a way of access that rather resembles a novel than a serialized narrative created for linear distribution (Mittell 2015b).

In this sense, Jason Mittell (2015a) discusses the experience of accumulating information as the modus operandi of recent series: from the episodic structure, it goes to a serial one, in which story arcs extend over several episodes of the text. Thus, the need to restore the story to an equillibrium at the beginning of each episode disappears in favor of larger structures, where action progresses from one segment to another. The trend is observable in comedies such as *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015 - present) or *Grace and Frankie* (Netflix, 2015 - present), which rely heavily on major story arcs. The same narrative pattern is also observed in adult animation sitcoms: *Bojack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014 - present) or *Big Mouth* (Netflix, 2017 - present) tend to put much greater emphasis on major narrative conflicts than classical series such as *Family Guy* or *The Simpsons*.

Thus, an important part of the cultural discourse on TV series has been focusing on the fact that recent shows, no matter their genre, tend to adopt more complex narrative structures in order to meet the needs of an audience that is actively involved in the viewing process.

At the same time, authors emphasize the huge influence that the emergence and popularization of VoD services - especially Netflix – had over the production and distribution of TV shows.

While most authors focus their studies on TV series' narrative complexity on prime-time dramas, this paper tries to track the clues of the same phenomenon in 30-minute shows. Thus, the present study explores the narrative features of linearly distributed and digitally published 30-minute series with at least one new season released between 2013 and 2018. Its ultimate goal is to delineate recurrent narrative patterns in original Netflix productions whose episodes are identifiable with

the 30-minute traditional broadcasting interval, and to point out the main structural differences between Netflix original productions and linearly distributed series.

Methodology

This study is based on content analysis. The quantitative dimension of the analysis is matched by the qualitative research applied on the content of the series itself. Both are supported by individual examples in the data set. The study also combines automatic data processing techniques with the manual coding of individual productions.

The analyzed data set is comprised of information about 111 series whose episodes are identifiable with the traditional 30-minute broadcasting interval[2]. Out of these, 57 shows were distributed by traditional television channels, and 54 were published by VoD portals: Netflix (36 series), Amazon (11 series) and Hulu (7 series). All the identified series with an average episode lenght of 35 minutes or less were analyzed.

A first step in developing the data set was to identify the IMDb.com page of each series. The collected page IDs were used to automatically extract data about each item in the set. Data extraction was performed through API queries of The Open Movie Database (OMDb). In this way, data on the title of the production, the release year and its cancellation year (where applicable), the release date of the first episode, the average length of an episode (or exact length, in the case of linearly distributed shows), the genre (s) of the production, the one-paragraph synopsis, the spoken languages, the country of origin, the number of seasons, the users' rating and the total number of their votes were extracted. Information regarding the original distributor has been added manually.

[2] With very few exceptions, all the analyzed series are comedies.

The second step was to manually frame each of the productions in the Series - Serial continuum, in order to identify the degree of narrative closure at the level of individual episodes. Due to the large number of productions, the variation of the serialization degree was reduced to three categories: Series, Mixed and Serial. In cases where the actual production was not consulted - for reasons of lack of access - the analysis was based on the individual episodes' synopses on IMDb.com.

Another important step in collecting information was the manual association of each production with a set of setting, conflict, and characters conventions. Due to the large number of series in the data set, conventions were identified based on the first season of each production. The study used inductive coding (Stuckey 2015; Thomas 2006), but also the TV Tropes community database for identifying conventional recurrent elements in the analyzed media texts. TV Tropes is a website that collects examples of tropes related to narrative conflict, characters and other narrative devices used in movies, series, comics, books and other media. The reason for choosing this source is that although it is based on user-generated content, the TV Tropes Wiki is the most comprehensive collection of such narrative devices and patterns currently available. At the same time, the community self-regulates and eliminates the tropes that prove to be irrelevant or redundant. The TV Tropes website has also been previously used in researching latent personality types of the characters in feature films (Bamman, O'Connor and Smith 2014).

Regarding the setting of the stories, the identified conventions refer to the spatial and temporal coordinates of the plot (eg house, hospital), but also to the tone of the story (eg noir, horror) or to a series of mise-en-scène elements which denote a certain genre (eg: forensics, science fiction).

In order to identify the types of conflict, Nancy Lamb's theoretical classification (2011) was used: man versus man, man versus nature[3], man versus society, man versus self (inner conflict). The study also added man vs. technology (Price 2016), and man vs. supernatural conflicts

[3] This study overlaps man-versus-fate conflicts with the man-vs-nature ones.

(Kallas 2010) as distinct categories. Also, three specific types of narrative conflict have been added: family comedies, work comedies, and friends comedies. The reason for describing these narrative features as conflict types was the need to individualize these story categories in the data set. In addition to the presence of these narrative mechanisms, the present study also distinctly marks the genre of the production in order to differentiate the story arcs of these narratives from the recurrent types of conflict in dramas. The reason for dividing the productions into three distinct categories is closely related to the observation of different narrative structures in the data set, but also to the need to relate certain productions to specific target audiences. Also, the research distinctly marks the plots or subplots which revolve around love stories between protagonists and other characters.

In order to identify the recurrent types of carracters present in the considered media texts, the study used several narrative tropes which were manually identified on the TV Tropes website.

The next step in the manual coding process was identifying the types of narrative structures present in each series. For this purpose, the study used the classifications theorized by Ronald Tobias in *20 Master Plots (And How To Build Them)* (1993) and Christopher Booker in *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2005). The two theories are similar in view of the fact that both assert the existence of a relatively small number of structural patterns of stories, to which any narrative can be reduced. Such research follows, on the one hand, the theoretical framework developed by Vladimir Propp (1968) in *The Morphology of the Folk Tale*, originally published in 1928, and, on the other hand, the ideas presented by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004), first published in 1949. The identification of the series considered with certain structural categories took into account the first season of each production.

The theories developed by Ronald Tobias and Christopher Booker can be a key point in identifying recurring narrative patterns that transcend the medium - book or film - and the specific genre of the cultural product under consideration. From this perspective, they are an important step in exploring the dominant structural categories

in the production of television series. Although these narrative categories were conceived by the two authors in view of closed narratives such as feature films or novels, they can be successfully applied to series, where the main narrative arc of each season has a certain degree of closure at the end of the last episode. It should also be noted that complex narratives contain elements belonging to several types of stories. For this reason many of the series have been associated with several narrative models and not a singular one.

The final stage of the manual coding process consisted in identifying series with female protagonists, and those with a hero character of a race other than Caucasian. At the same time, the series that have at least one main character with a LGBTQ sexual orientation were identified. Through this process, the present study aimed to explore, in a general context, gender, race, and sexual representations in 30-minute television narratives released in recent years, and thus to identify potential niche target audiences for certain media texts.

Information about the identified narrative conventions and features was processed using KH Coder - a free software for natural language processing and data mining. The calculation of the co-occurrence matrix was performed automatically based on the Jaccard similarity coefficient. In the visual representation based on this matrix, a minimum Jaccard distance of 0.1 was considered. The charts presented in the following section were obtained using KH Coder and Tableau Public. This paper continues by presenting and discussing the results of the study.

Results and discussions

Episode lenght

The results show that series created for digital distribution are 3 minute longer on average than those produced for weekly broadcasting. While an individual episode of a digitally published show is 29 minutes long on average, an average linear episode is only 26 minutes long (Figure 1).

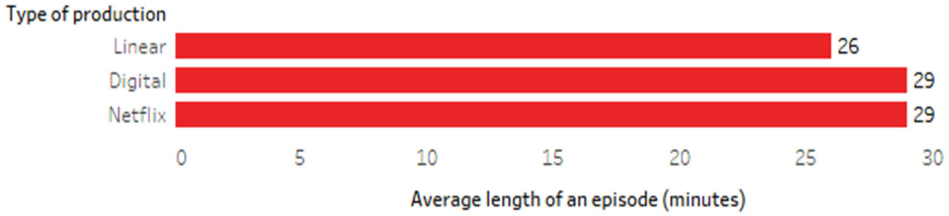

Figure 1. Average lenght of an episode across different types of content

On the one hand, this result shows a shift in the temporal format of the shows, closely related to the lack of advertising breaks on VoD portals. On the other hand, we can also observe important differences between linear and digital shows when we take a look at the frequency of certain length categories (Figure 2).

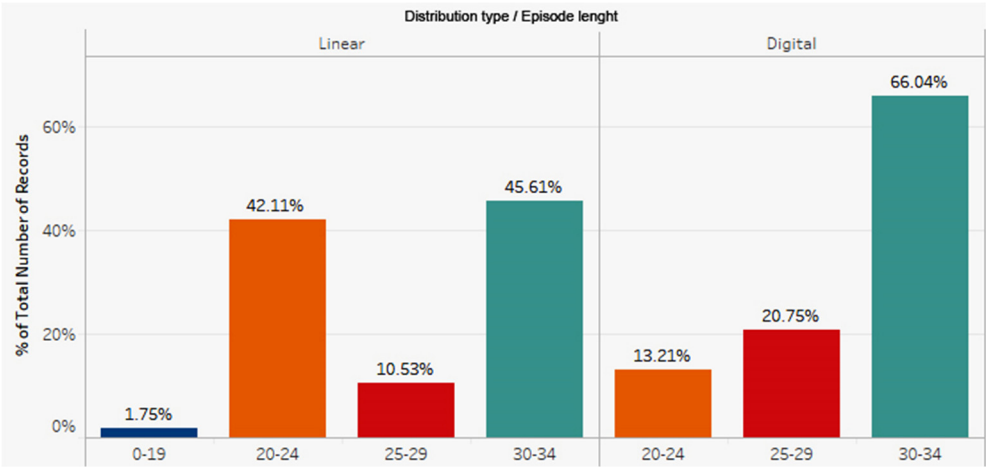

Figure 2. Frequency of episode length categories in relation to type of distribution

66.04% of the digitally distributed shows have an average episode lengtht of 30 to 34 minutes, whereas only 45.61% of the linear productions share the same feature. At the same time, only 13.21% of the digitally distributed series fall within the range of 20-24 minutes, the traditional length of a sitcom, whereas 42.11% of the linear series

remain dependent on the traditional sitcom temporal formula. This is a sign of the fact that the development of VoD portals produces genre mutations, and comedies take the form of media products based on longer segments. The presence of the 30-34 minutes category among linear productions can be explained by the inclusion in the data set of several series produced by subscription-based TV channels such as HBO or Showtime. In the absence of commercial breaks, these services also give up on the traditional 22 or 23-minute per episode formula, and adopt the half an hour comedy model.

Another important feature of digitally published series is the fact that the length of individual episodes varies depending on the narrative needs of that specific segment, and is not subject to a predetermined duration. Figure 3 shows the episode lenght variation in the first season of *Grace and Frankie* (Netflix, 2015-present).

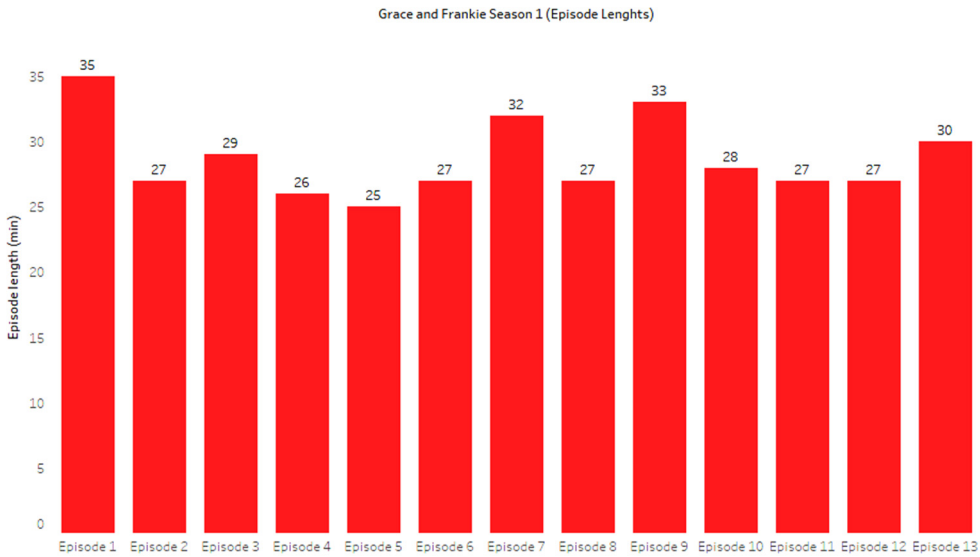

Figure 3. Episode length in the first season of *Grace and Frankie*

The episodes last between 25 and 35 minutes, which is certainly made possible by the distribution mechanisms implied by VoD portals. This type of creative freedom is closely linked to the disappearance of

the external constraints of a fixed broadcasting schedule. The digital distribution of series also causes extreme cases of episode length fluidity: in *Mindhunter* (Netflix, 2017-present), episodes vary between 34 and 60 minutes, while in *Godless* (Netflix, 2018-present), individual segments of the show last between 40 and 81 minutes. The phenomenon speaks of an increased creative freedom of the production team. Screenwriters and directors create episodes according to the narrative needs of the production, and do not subdue to a set of external rules.

Series and serials

An important distinction made by scholars (Kozloff 1992; R. Nelson, quoted in Allrath, Gymnich, and Surkamp 2005) is the one between episodic shows (series) and those based on major story arcs (serials). Also, Jason Mittell (2015a) notes that the growing narrative complexity of TV series is closely related to the development of stories based on continuity between episodes and between seasons, while other authors (Brojakowski 2015; Romano 2013) talk about the emergence of "hyperserialized" productions. The present section of the study analyzes the productions included in the dataset from the standpoint of the series-serial continuum theorized by R. Nelson Nelson (quoted Allrath, Gymnich, și Surkamp 2005). Figure 4 shows the differences between the productions published by VoD portals and those distributed by traditional television channels from this perspective.

An interesting phenomenon revealed by the results of the present study is the massive serialization of digitally distributed comedies and other 30-minute shows. 68.52% of the productions are mixed, while 29.63% of them can be categorized as serials based on story arcs that spread over several episodes, a season or even several seasons. On the other hand, 28.07% of the linear media products that fall into this category follow episodic formulas, 63.16% are mixed and 8.77% are serial. Differences between the two types of content considered show that while traditional television remains partially dependent on classical structures, digitally distributed comedies follow formulas that rely

heavily on narrative progression and accumulation. The results reveal narrative mutations produced in genres such as the sitcom, which, when it comes to Netflix shows, takes the form of serialized comedies that rely heavily on major story arcs. At the same time, the phenomenon leads to the emergence of mixed comedies, such as *Master of None* (2015-present) or *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-present), as well as serial comedies that follow continuity-based structures such as *Everything Sucks!* (2018), *On My Block* (2018) or *American Vandal* (2017-present).

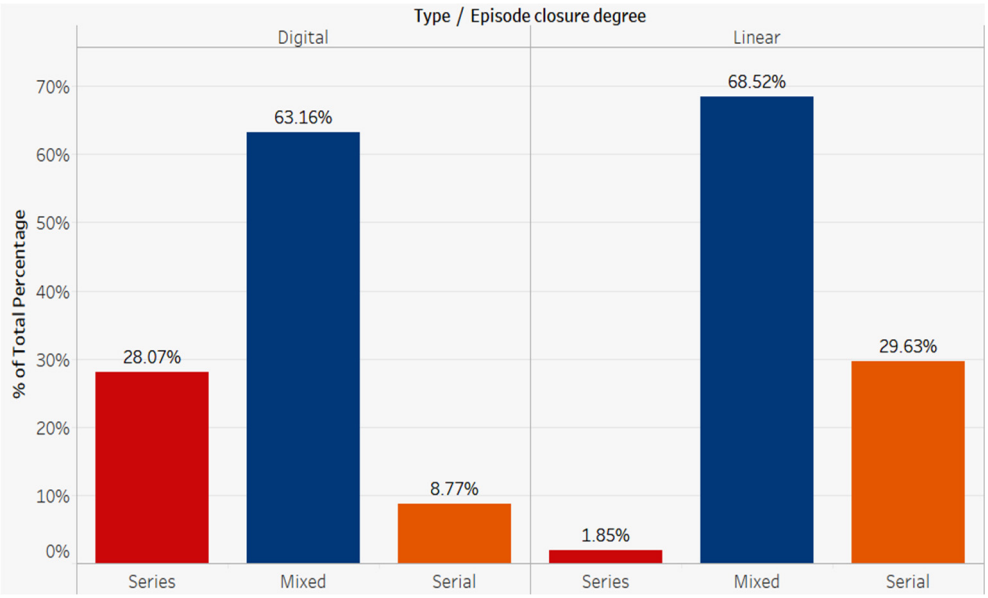

Figure 4. The relation between distribution type and serialization degree

The emphasis placed by digital shows' creators on serialization formulas based on narrative progression is closely related to the increasing complexity of TV series highlighted by scholars. The results of this study show that VoD services mostly put their bets on continuity-based series and that this production strategy leads to a reduction in the number of shows based on episodic story arcs. The phenomenon reveals the emergence of new narrative formulas, through mutations in traditional genres.

Narrative tropes and conventions

This section of the study aims to present the recurrent narrative features of the series considered in relation to their type of distribution. For this purpose, Figure 5 shows the most common setting conventions in linear, digital, and Netflix original productions.

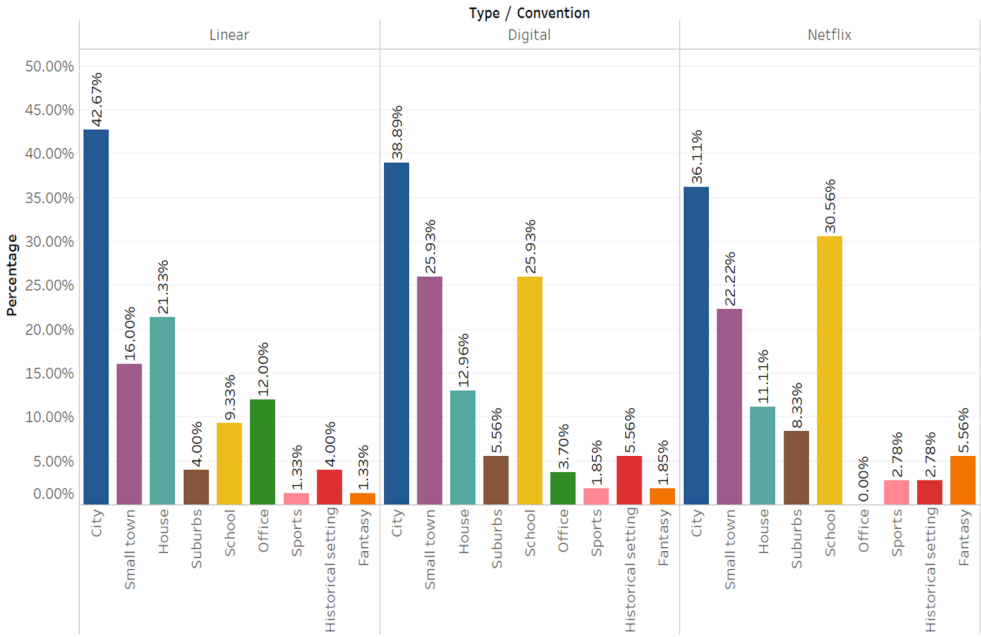

Figure 5. Setting conventions frequency in the analyzed productions

A first major observation is related to the percentages of serialized narratives that take place in a house or in a limited number of indoor spaces that appear recurrently. Thus, if 21.33% of the linear series comply with this convention, the percentage is only 12.96% in the case of digitally distributed series. In the case of original Netflix productions, it drops to 11.11%. The phenomenon speaks about the mutations going on in contemporary sitcoms. Whereas traditional sitcoms tend to use a small number of (studio-built) indoor spaces as a setting, newer comedy series tend to be filmed in real and more diversified settings. This is also related

to the modern use of a single-camera setup, which gives a more cinematic feel to comedies, as opposed to the multiple-camera setup used in traditional sitcoms. Thus, Netflix relies heavily on serialized comedies, which redefine the classical sitcom formula, while a high percentage of the comedies distributed by television channels remain dependent on traditional conventions. There is also a decrease in the number of serialized stories that take place in offices: 12% of the linear productions, 3.7% of the digital ones. Another interesting phenomenon is the strong emphasis that Netflix producers place on developing series about teenagers, whose stories take place mostly in educational institutions (in most cases, a high school). The fact that 30.56% of the 30-minute series produced by the American company start from this premise can indicate the fact that Netflix relies in many cases on media texts capable of meeting the narrative expectations of a young audience.

Figure 6 shows that the distinctions between series created for different types of distribution extend beyond setting conventions.

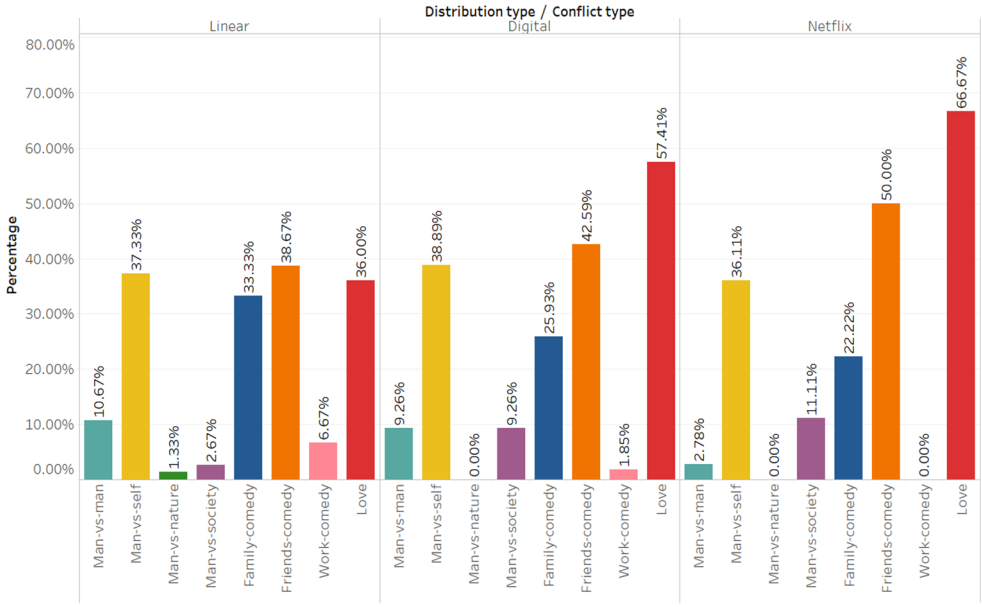

Figure 6. Conflict types frequency in the analyzed productions

When it comes to conflict types, a first observation can be related to the strong presence of love stories and love subplots in digitally distributed series (66.67% of the cases, compared to 36% of the linear shows). At the same time, many Netflix narratives are built around groups of friends (50%), which could be a new indication of a production strategy that oftenly relies on attracting a young audience. In addition to this, the percentage of family comedies is lower when it comes to Netflix productions (22.22%) than for linear series (33.33%). This phenomenon is directly related to the previously mentioned emphasis that the Netflix production strategy puts on narratives which revolve around friend groups. The results of the study also show that many 30-minute series (37.33% of the linear productions, 36.11% of the digital ones) are built around man-vs-self story arcs, which follow the inner evolution of a main character.

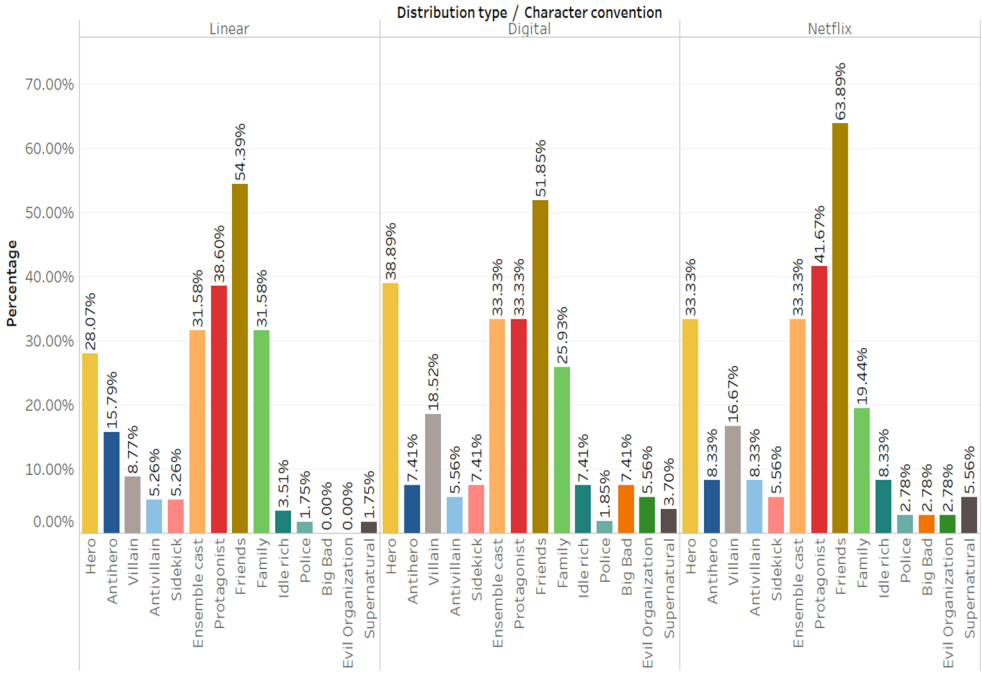

Figure 7. Character conventions frequency in the analyzed productions

The high percentage of narratives developed around a protagonist in the content categories considered (41.67% for Netflix productions, 38.6% for linear series) confirms the increased popularity of productions whose story unfolds around a social group, but use the convention of a central character (Figure 7). This phenomenon was previously discussed by Innocenti and Pescatore (2015). Most often, such protagonists function as an audience's point of view character, and all the events taking place in the narrative universe are the result of their actions (eg, *Master of None* - Netflix, 2015-present, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* - FOX, 2013-present). Another interesting aspect is the relation between the presence of friends and family members as central characters. In linear series, families are present in 31.58% of cases, while friends have an important role in the narrative in 54.39% of them. When it comes to Netflix productions, the difference between percentages is much higher: families play a central role in 19.44% of productions, while 69.89% of narratives revolve around friend groups. This result once again highlights the importance of targeting a young audience in Netflix's production strategy.

At the same time, 28.07% of the linear series and 33.33% of the Netflix productions revolve around a hero. An interesting phenomenon observed in the analyzed content is the high proportion of antiheroes and antivillains present in the productions. 15.79% of the linear shows and 8.33% of the Netflix productions use an antihero as the main character. The results of the study are in line with the observation of the authors Romano (2013) and VanDerWerff (2017), who also observed a growing appetite of show creators for antiheroes. The high proportion of antivillains is related to the same phenomenon. Writing such characters can be a sign of the narrative complexity of recent series. Many of them no longer revolve around a world where the morality of characters is a clearly dichotomized one: black or white, bad or good. Developing morally complex characters is a sign of the narrative complexity scholars have been talking about in recent years.

Figure 8 shows co-occurences between certain setting conventions, types of conflict, character typologies, and serialization degree of the analyzed productions.

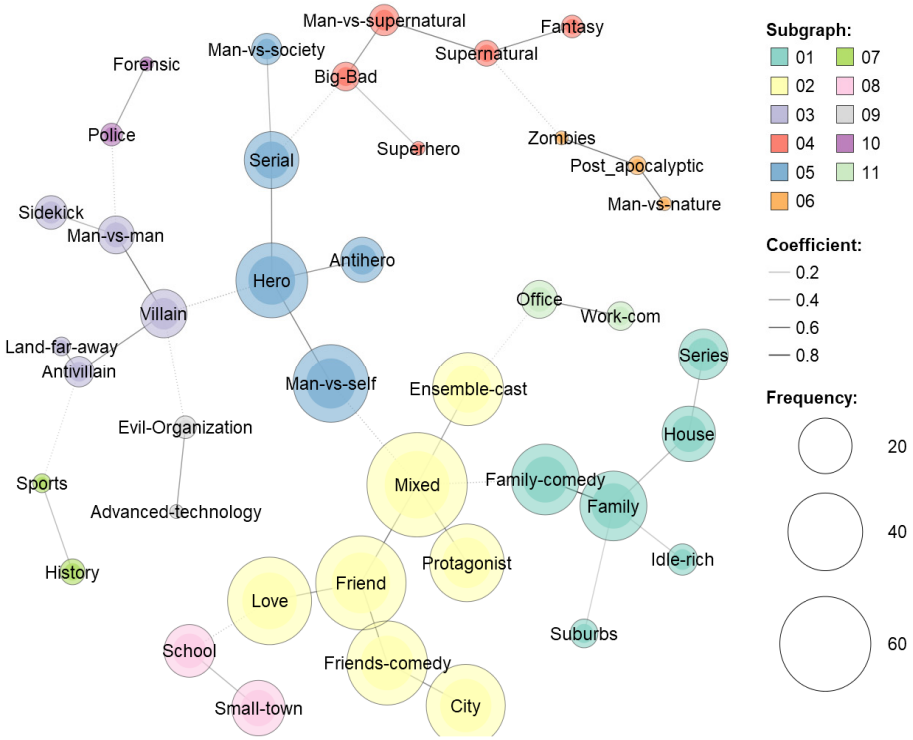

Figure 8. Co-occurrence network of narrative tropes, conventions and serialization degree

Cluster 1 shows a strong correlation between several features which are specific to traditional sitcoms. The episodic structure, the narrative revolving around a family (in many cases an "idle rich" family who lives in the suburbs), a house or a limited number of closed spaces that appear recurrently in the series are all features that, as the results of this study have pointed out, can mostly be met in linear series.

Cluster 2 reveals the narrative patterns of comedies which revolve around friend groups. Usually, these productions are mixed, meaning they are based both on episodic story arcs and on narrative progression from one segment of the show to the next. These comedies either use the convention of a main character or revolve around an ensemble cast

comprised of characters who sometimes play a formulaic role in the narrative. These stories usually take place in big cities and use love subplots in order to move the narrative forward.

Clusters 3 and 5 reveal the fact that highly serialized productions usually revolve around a hero (in many cases, an antihero) who gets opposed by an antagonist. In these narratives, the main story arc is represented either by the inner transformation of the protagonist (made possible by the forces that oppose him or her), of by the opposition between the hero and the villain (in this cases, the inner evolution of the main character works as a subplot). The co-occurrence network also brings forward the fact that the presence of a man-vs-man conflict oftenly involves the use of a sidekick in the story.

Clusters 4, 6 reveal a smaller set of serialized narratives that revolve around the fight between a hero and an opposing force, in which certain genre conventions play an important role in the development of the production. These narrative formulas are much less represented in the data set than comedies and are mostly used in 60-minute productions.

Cluster 10 shows the existence of a small number of shows that borrow narrative conventions from police procedurals, but apply them in a shorter, 30-minute format.

Clusters 7 and 11 reveal other narrative formulas based on specific settings: high school series and work coms.

The co-occurrence network unfolds three main narrative models: episodic series which usually revolve around families, mixed narratives which tell the story of a friend group (either through an ensemble cast or by using a protagonist) and highly serialized man-vs-man productions. As the results of this paper have already showed through tropes and conventions' frequency, the latter category is less common when it comes to 30-minute series.

Plot types

Another way to identify the most commonly used narrative models in the series considered is by exploring how these narratives

reflect certain archetipal story structures. From this perspective, Figure 9 shows the occurrence frequency for each of the 20 master plots theorized by Ronald Tobias (1993) in the corpus.

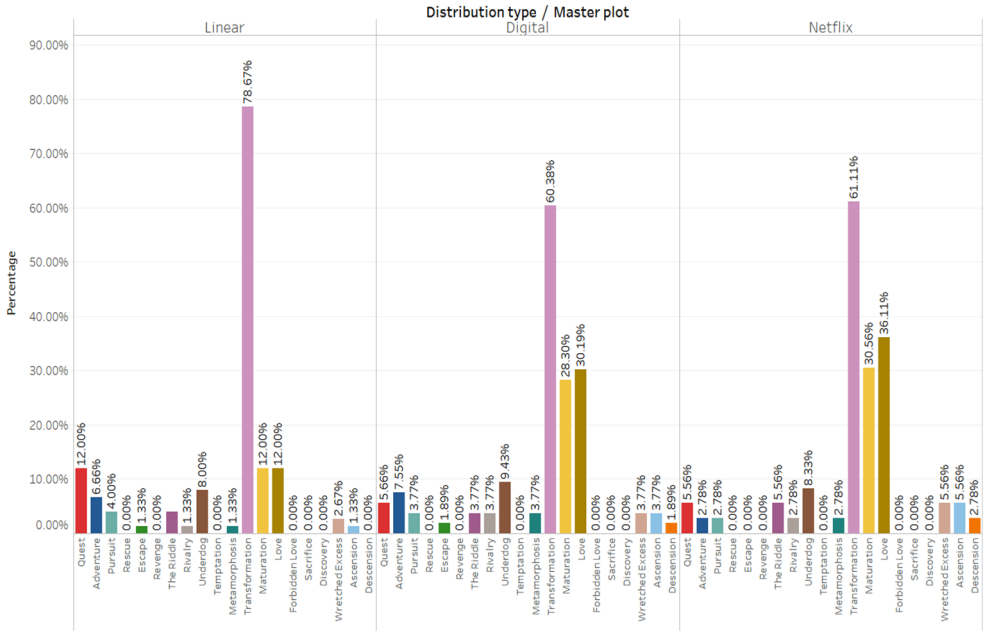

Figure 9. Plot types frequency (Tobias 1993)

As the figure shows, linear series tend to put a stronger emphasis on stories that follow the inner transformation of the main character than Netflix productions (78.67% versus 61.11%). Although this could be the case, we cannot ignore the fact that 30.56% of the Netflix series tell stories about maturation, another plot type that involves the inner development of the protagonist. The high percentage of productions that tell such stories indicates once again that targeting a young audience is a core point of Netflix's production strategy. Another interesting observation refers to the fact that many Netflix productions revolve around love plots (36.11% versus 12% in the case of linear shows), a phenomenon that was already emphasised by the previous findings of the present study.

Regarding the narrative categories defined by Christopher Brooker in *The Seven Basic Plots* (2005), most of the stories considered fall under the comedy typology (Figure 10). At the same time, there are much more digital series that revolve around a character's journey from rags to riches compared to linear shows. This structure was identified in 25% of the original Netflix productions and in 2.67% of the traditional, weekly-distributed shows. As a confirmation of the high percentage of maturation stories already observed, these narratives could once again be an indication of the fact that attracting a young audience is an important part of Netflix's global strategy.

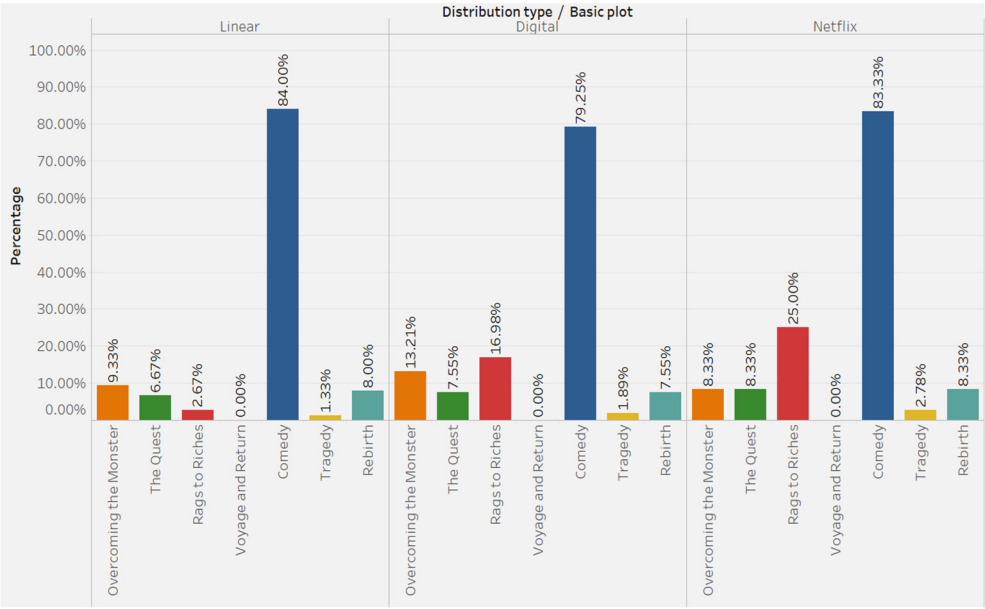

Figure 10. Plot types frequency (Booker 2005)

Gender, sexual and racial representations

One third of the Netflix original shows considered have a female protagonist, while in the case of linear productions the percentage drops to 28% (Figure 11). The result is consistent with the conclusions

of other studies. A research by San Diego State University (Buckley 2018) showed that 24% of the highest-earning American films in 2017 had female protagonists. Also, another study found that women are better represented in television series than in feature films: while the proportion of women in the total number of characters having lines was 32% in 2016 for feature films, it goes up to 42% when it comes to series (Lauzen 2017).

At the same time, the same researcher shows that in 2016 47% of the major characters in streaming series were women, while the percentage was only 42% for traditional television channels (Lauzen 2017). It should be noted that the study also considered TV genres such as reality-shows, and not just fictional series. Also, the present study only took into account the series protagonists, as opposed to all major characters. The results show a higher degree of women representation in Netflix original series, but not in all digital shows.

As far as the representation of sexual minorities is concerned, the highest percentage of series with at least one LGBTQ protagonist was recorded for Netflix original shows, with 19.44% of the productions. The observation is consistent with the results of a GLAAD Media Institute study (2018), which shows that the streaming portal is the most inclusive major media channel in the US when it comes to representing LGBTQ people. The phenomenon can be linked to the business strategy of the company, which focuses on attracting and retaining a number of niche audiences, and does not target a single, homogeneous audience (Lotz 2017).

11.11% of the Netflix series have African American protagonists, while the percentage for linear shows stands at 13.33%. A UCLA study (Mohdin 2018) shows that in the 2015-2016 season, 20% of the important roles in cable television productions were played by African Americans, while the percentage was only 12.9% for VoD portals. The differences could be explained by the fact that the present study only took into account protagonists, and not all the main characters

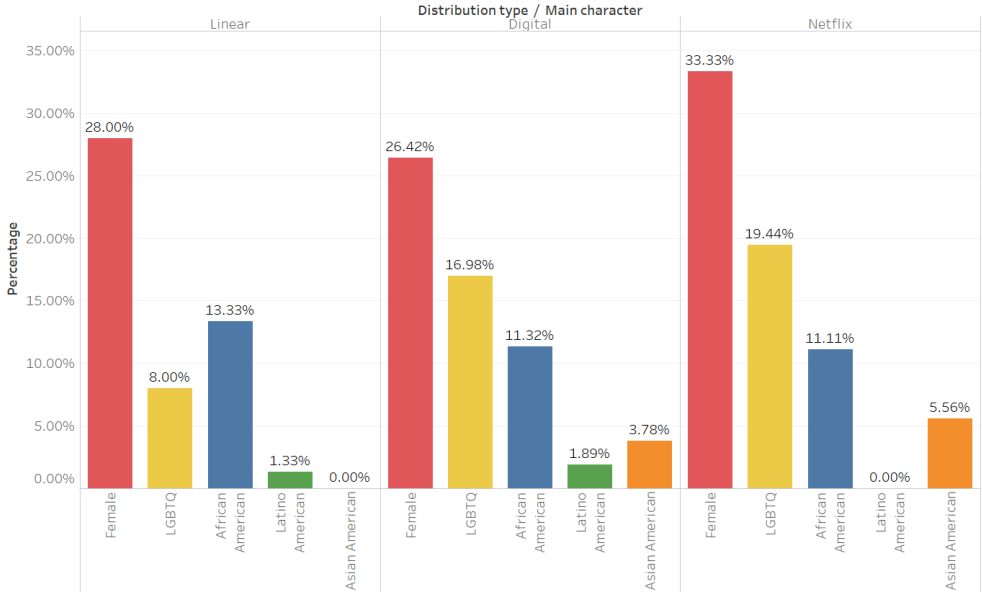

Figure 11. Gender, sexual and racial representation in the analyzed series

On the one hand, Netflix proves to be the most inclusive media channel when it comes to women, sexual minorities, and Asian Americans. On the other, the results show that African American actors get more important roles in cable television shows than they do in Netflix original series.

However, the fact that Netflix has significantly increased its original content production since 2015, as well as the company's increased attention to the representation of the African-American community in the media - as shown by the recent "New Day In Hollywood" campaign (Britni 2018) - could indicate an effort of the streaming company to catch up with the traditional industry.

Towards a narrative model of 30-minute digital series

Exploring the structural features of 30-minute shows allows the identification of recurring narrative patterns in the analyzed series. This section of the paper aims to summarize the results obtained by compiling

the identified narrative patterns. To this end, the study will explore the functioning mechanisms of linear series, respectively the ones of original Netflix productions, as a standard for digital series.

	Linear shows	Netflix shows
Episode lenght	Average length: 26 minutes 46% of productions have episodes ranging from 30 to 34 minutes 43% have episodes ranging from 20 to 24 minutes Episode lengths are generally stable	Average length: 29 minutes 66% of productions have episodes ranging from 30 to 34 minutes Variable episode lengths
Serialization degree	63% - mixed story arcs 28% - episodic story arcs 9% - major story arcs Although the majority of the series rely on mixed story arcs, many productions follow the traditional episodic structure.	68% - mixed story arcs 2% - episodic story arcs 30% - major story arcs The traditional pattern of episodic story arcs disappears almost entirely. Many comedies are based on narrative progression from one episode to another.
Setting	The most common setting is a large city (43%). There are also many series whose action takes place mostly in a house or in a limited number of recurrent indoor spaces (21%). The phenomenon speaks about the frequent use of a sitcom-specific convention.	The most common setting is a big city (36%). There are fewer series whose action takes place in a house or in a limited number of indoor spaces that appear recurrently (11%). There is a high percentage of narratives that take place in small communities (22%) and in schools (31%). This last observation can be interpreted as part of Netflix's strategy of attracting a young audience.
Narrative conflict	Most stories follows the comedic formula of sitcoms revolving around friend groups (39%) or families (33%). The most common type of conflict is man vs. self (37%). Also, love stories play an important role in fictional universes (36%).	Half of the productions rely on a comedy-specific conflict which revolves around a group of friends. There are fewer family comedies than in linear productions (22%). Love stories are extremely important: 67% of the productions are based on such a story arc.

	Linear shows	Netflix shows
Characters	In the case of 54% of the series, friends have an important role in the narrative. Members of one or more families have a central role in 32% of stories. 32% of the series rely on ensemble casts, while 39% revolve around a protagonist.	Many of the series revolve around a protagonist (42%). Friend groups play a major role in 64% of productions. 33% of the series rely on ensemble casts. The strong focus on exploring the actions of friend groups may indicate that attracting a young audience plays an important role in Netflix's production strategy.
Plot types (Tobias 1993)	Most productions follow the inner transformation of one or more characters (79%).	Although the most common type of plot is the one that explores the inner transformation of a character (61%), there is a significant percentage of maturation stories (31% vs. 12% in the case of linear series). Also, 36% of the productions follow the narrative pattern of a love story.
Plot types (Booker 2005)	84% of the productions can be identified as comedies (as an aesthetic category).	83% of the productions follow the narrative mechanisms of comedy. There are a number of stories that follow the path of a protagonist from rags to riches (25%).
Gender, sexual, and racial representations	28% of the series have female protagonists. At the same time, 13% of the productions have at least one African-American protagonist and 8% have one with a declared minority sexual orientation.	There is a higher percentage of female protagonists: 33%. The results also show a high percentage of productions that have a LGBTQ protagonist: 19%. African-Americans are present as protagonists in 11% of the productions.

Conclusions

The present study highlighted the main narrative coordinates of serialized shows distributed by the big players in the market over the last five years, and also highlighted the differences between TV series produced for weekly distribution and the ones created for digital publishing on VoD platforms. At the same time, the present research confirms the narrative differences between Netflix productions and

cable television formats. The results show that digital productions deviate from TV-specific time conventions: to begin with, the length of individual episodes increases in the case of digitally published shows. Also, in the absence of precise time constraints for the creators of a show, episode lengths tend to vary when it comes to content created for digital distribution. Thus, the episode length becomes rather dependent on the narrative needs of the specific segments of the production. It is a first major contribution to increasing the production team's creative freedom.

Another important observation of the paper refers to the industry's strong emphasis on major story arcs. Although this can be seen in both production categories, it is much more evident in series created for digital distribution. While some weekly distributed TV series still use the episodic conflict pattern - as with traditional sitcoms -, such a narrative approach is almost entirely absent from the digital production landscape. Ample story arcs suggest a high level of narrative complexity (Mittell 2015a) for the media products considered.

This study also led to the identification of a set of features of what Jason Mittell (2015a) would call "complex television series": highly serialized comedies that revolve around a protagonist (Innocenti and Pescatore 2015), the strong emphasis that show creators put on following the inner transformation of a main character, the taste for antiheroes and antivillains (Romano 2013; VanDerWerff 2017) are all signs of a new stage in the production of television series. At the same time, this study revealed one of the core mechanisms that Netflix uses in its production strategy: attracting niche audiences such as the LGBTQ community or targetting a young audience play an important role in the global design of the streaming company. In addition to this, the results of this research showed the main genre mutations in comedy series. From this perspective, is crucial to observe that although it has gained most of its cultural capital through its original dramas, Netflix also works on developing new narrative models for 30-minute series. Only by stories based on narrative progression and complex characters can these shows satisfy the needs of a young and active audience, who has full control over what, when, where and how much of the productions they watch in each viewing session.

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